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**Academic Literacies Study of Personal Statements for Higher Education
Students' and academics' interpretations and assumptions across institutional
contexts**

Chiu, Yuan-Li

Awarding institution:
King's College London

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Author: Yuan-Li Chiu

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**Academic Literacies Study of Personal Statements for Higher Education:
Students' and academics' interpretations and assumptions across institutional
contexts**

Yuan-Li Tiffany CHIU

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Department of Education and Professional Studies
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Supervisors: Professor Constant Leung and Professor Brian Street

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Abstract

My thesis explores the Personal Statements (PSs) written by student applicants and goes beyond merely identifying textual features of the PS itself. I have drawn on an academic literacies perspective (Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 2004) that considers issues of meaning-making, writer identity that students bring to the act of writing, and writing and evaluation practices within a particular institutional and epistemological context. Specifically, I investigate students' PSs for PhD applications at one UK-based and one US-based university, with the focus on the interpretations and assumptions of students and academics regarding this type of text; students' identities as presented in their PS writing; and also practices and conventions in relation to the PS across institutional contexts.

My data comprises PS texts and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 22 students and 19 academics at two focal universities. My key findings reveal that despite there being similarities between the expectations of students and academics concerning what should be included in the PS, contrasting views tend to occur when academics read and commented on students' PSs. Such discrepancies are associated with what Street (2009) refers to as the 'hidden features' of academic writing, which are often not made explicit to student writers. I have also found that the ways in which students approach their PSs are closely associated with their writer identity that they bring to the act of writing as well as an awareness of their readers and the context for this act of writing. For academics, their interpretations of PSs tend to vary across institutional contexts and even vary amongst individuals within the same department. Such variations may be associated with their consideration of the ideology and epistemology in their disciplinary discourse community. This study contributes to an understanding of the PS and its associated writing and evaluation practices from ideological and epistemological perspectives. It also complements and extends the traditional genre-based move-step approach in relation to this type of text.

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Preface and overview of the thesis

This thesis investigates a document that is known as the **Personal Statement** (or the **Statement of Purpose**), which usually serves as a part of the application for admission to higher education institutions. The terms ‘Personal Statement’ and ‘Statement of Purpose’ are often used interchangeably on graduate student application forms (Swales, 2009). In this thesis, I will use the term ‘Personal Statement’ (henceforth PS) in all my discussions. The idea for conducting this doctoral research on the PS derives from my own experiences of applying to postgraduate programmes (PhD studies applications) in the UK and the US and my efforts in helping fellow students write their PSs. I have come to realise that producing this form of written communication is quite a challenge. Besides my own experience, I have observed many applicants’ struggles and frustrations when writing this particular type of text. Many individuals encounter difficulties when it comes to understanding the PS, especially in terms of its rhetorical styles, linguistic features, voice types, audiences’ expectations, power relations and identity, and its relation to institutional epistemology. Furthermore, the criteria for judging PSs tend to vary across disciplines and programmes and over time, thereby compounding the challenges for students who will require more time to investigate the different and often implicit features of the PS. For these reasons, I chose to conduct research on students’ PSs and began to investigate the research literature that could help me describe and explain the processes involved (*see* below and also Chapter 2 on Theory).

The PS is one amongst a number of the documents required during the admissions process for higher education course applications. Its purpose is to convey personal information about applicants, such as their motivation or future goals in their proposed field of study, as well as to persuade the academic who will evaluate students’ applications during the selection process that they are suitably qualified to study at the institution. Most postgraduate university applications require applicants to submit PSs along with other application documents. For example, for doctoral applications made to US-based universities, students are usually required to submit

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several documents, including their PS, application form, a resume, letters of recommendation, transcripts of their undergraduate degree(s), an official copy of their standardised test scores for the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) and, if they are international applicants (with the exception of those who hold an undergraduate degree from a university where English is the primary language of instruction), they will also need to submit their TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) results. For doctoral applications made to UK-based universities, students are often asked to submit their application form, PS, research proposal, references, transcripts of each academic degree(s), and IELTS or TOEFL scores (if English is not their first language). Compared with other admissions requirements, including the official scores and academic transcripts that have already been ascertained, the content of the PS can be interpreted as being more under the applicant's direct control (Brown, 2005), giving them the opportunity to write something different from the information offered in the other documents. Applicants will also have the opportunity to promote themselves in their own words.

However, in comparison with other academic publications, such as research articles and dissertations, samples of PSs written by individual applicants have received less attention; hence, little is known about the norms of their practice. Although existing genre studies on PSs have revealed various textual features across different programmes of study (Brown, 2004; Bekins, Huckin, & Kijak, 2004; Samraj & Monk, 2008), many of the conventions of the PS for higher education applications remain implicit, akin to the 'hidden features' noted by Street (2009) in his analysis of a postgraduate course activity in the US.

In my study, PS documents written by student applicants can be regarded as forms of academic writing, of the kind indicated by Swales (1996) and as my research developed I began to draw upon some of the key concepts he and others have developed in this field, at the same time taking into account the distinctive and indeed unique character of the PS. For instance, such student writing has been referred to by Bhatia (1993), as an academic promotional genre, but even then, the PS, written by student applicants, differs from the conventional student

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essay/assignment within an academic setting. While acknowledging that the PS is distinctive in ways that I will draw out in Chapter 1, since it is written by students prior to them being accepted by an institution, I also take the PS to be a form of such academic writing in the sense that it is used for academic purposes in the context of graduate school admissions. It also represents an opportunity for students to promote themselves and negotiate access to become a member of a target academic community addressing a potential academic audience and so therefore has to draw upon and display at least some features of ‘academic writing’ as described by researchers such as Swales, Bhatia etc. For instance, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 1, the existing genre studies approaches to the PS have revealed that varied textual linguistic features are identifiable within these documents, and across different programmes of study (Swales, 2009; Brown, 2004; Bekins et al., 2004; Ding, 2007). As such, it can be said that the genre analysis of PSs indicates the distinct style and epistemology of PSs submitted for different disciplines and academic discourse communities. In the light of this perspective, it can be inferred that the rhetorical features of PSs may be shaped by individual academic disciplines which have their own specific ways of constructing knowledge, in the way ‘academic literacies’ perspectives would suggest (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Here I would also argue that the disciplinary variations in terms of rhetorical features that can be identified in PS texts would be especially clear in the case of postgraduate study admissions as opposed to undergraduate studies. Specifically, my study focuses on PSs for doctoral study applications and it is commonly acknowledged that this level of study requires a certain degree of scholarship and research specialisation. In this context, it can be inferred that whilst the PS, as its name suggests, is ‘personal’ in nature, it may still demand a certain level of ‘academic’ status to meet the expectations of a potential academic audience. From this discussion, the PS is contextualised as a form of academic writing in my study.

In fact, the use of the term ‘academic writing’ is contested in the recognition that academic genres are “in a constant state of flux” (Chihota, 2007, p. 134). In this context, it can be inferred that the boundaries amongst different modes of discourse or text types seem to be blurred. For example, in Chihota’s (2007) work, as in Lillis and Scott’s (2007) special issue of the *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, on ‘the

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pedagogic spaces’ such as writing workshops/circles which aim to assist students in developing their postgraduate identities and understanding the expectations of their field of study, he describes these vibrant spaces as “pedagogical safe-house” in which students can interact with others comfortably and retrospect to their own agenda through various activities conducted in these spaces (p. 133). From his research, Chihota (2007) draws attention to the notion of “hybridised or imbricated genres”, in which “the communicative resources and strategies *available* to writers located within the ‘peripheries’ of the so-called global village are freely interwoven (or perhaps *serially* woven into) the fabric of their texts: proverbs, idioms, expletives, anecdotes (or other forms of narrative), fragments of journalese, pieces of poetry, etcetera” (p. 134). From this discussion, it can be argued that what counts as ‘academic’ writing needs to be carefully examined and its conventional definition as normatively described may not be the way the term was intended by many teacher-researchers in the field of (academic) literacies studies. Again this reinforces my claim that the PS can be seen as a form of academic writing, though it differs from student writing in the university itself and from types of professional writing, such as research articles, that “fulfils a purpose of education in a college or university” (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006, p. 4).

In the light of these preliminary approaches to the PS that recognise its distinctive features, this thesis draws on an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006). The emphasis from this perspective, on writing as a social practice, and its examination of students’ writing from ideological and epistemological perspectives, provides a conceptual apparatus for handling these complex features and helps to “foreground many dimensions to student academic writing which had previously remained invisible or had been ignored” (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 12). In line with the academic literacies perspective, it is crucial to explore issues such as “what is the nature of ‘academic’ writing in different sites and contexts?” and “to what extent and in which specific ways do prevailing conventions and practices enable and constrain meaning making?”, as indicated by Lillis and Scott (2007, p. 9) in their article on ‘Defining academic literacies research’. With these ideas in mind, this thesis conducts an exploratory qualitative investigation of such documents for doctoral studies applications within the field of education at one UK-based and one US-based

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university. More specifically, I focus on what my student participants have written in their PSs and the ways in which they have composed their PSs. I also explore students' assumptions about this type of text. Furthermore, I investigate the views of academics towards these students' PSs, and their assumptions and evaluations of this type of text in general. The academic literacies theoretical stance also allows for the analytic focus to shift from merely text-based analysis to an approach that examines writing as a process (Lillis & Scott, 2007), and it will thereby complement and extend the traditional genre-based move-step analysis of the PS texts.

As subsequent chapters will elaborate, this study investigates four questions:

1. How do students position themselves in their PSs during the writing process?
2. What are the interpretations and perceptions that have been formed by students and academics concerning the PS at the two focal universities?
3. Are there any mismatches between the views of students and academics concerning the PS at the two focal universities?
4. Are there any institutional variations across the graduate programmes, at the UK-based and US-based universities, with regards to literacy practices associated with the PS at the two focal universities? If so, how have these variations led to different meanings associated with the PS?

Chapter 1 provides a background to my study and establishes a rationale for the need to investigate students' PSs. More specifically, a review of the existing studies on the PS has revealed that the majority of research has adopted a genre-based rhetorical move-step analysis to explore this type of text in terms of its textual features. This chapter provides an outline of the significance of the PS as a part of gatekeeping components that determines students' access to higher education and

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discusses the challenges of composing this type of text. A detailed discussion of the issues concerning genre theory and analysis in relation to the PS will also be discussed in this chapter through a small-scale exploratory study on two graduate students' PSs. The reflections on this small-scale exploratory study suggest that the PS is not just about textual features; instead, it is concerned with complex issues such as writer identity which the students bring to the act of writing, and the writer-reader relationship, which merit further exploration. In other words, genre-based textual analysis alone prove to be inadequate (leaving a 'gap') when it comes to understanding the writing practices that are associated with the PS. At the end of Chapter 1, the focus of the main study is introduced and it connects a more social practice approach (i.e. academic literacies perspective of writing) to the PS and its relevant writing and evaluation practices. A discussion of the theoretical perspectives that I have adopted for my study will be expanded upon in Chapter 2.

In **Chapter 2** I discuss the academic literacies perspective as the foundation for my theoretical and methodological framework. Specifically, the use of an academic literacies approach aims to fill gaps in the genre-based approach (specifically, the move-step analysis) to the PS. In Chapter 2, I argue that the academic literacies perspective allows my study on PSs to go beyond a genre-based move-step analysis to consider the need for the exploration of other implicit features, such as issues of writer voice and identity, writer-reader expectations, power relations, and institutional ideology and epistemology (Lea & Street, 2006). I also discuss the relationship between the concepts of literacy events and literacy practices in which the former is concerned with phenomena that are observable (i.e. PS texts) whilst the latter is associated with the "broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts" (Street, 2000, p. 11). Such perspectives provide a means for approaching the PS text as a part of literacy events during students' application processes, and also during the evaluation process to be carried out by academics during the admissions period. Furthermore, it is possible to examine the purposes, motivations and values of those who use the PS in order to uncover the assumptions made by the students and academics that may give meaning to their interactions with the PS.

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In this chapter, I also discuss the relations between the genre and academic literacies models ('study skills', 'academic socialisation', and 'academic literacies') as issues of genre are "central to the three models of student writing" (Russell et al., 2009, p. 405). This chapter also includes a review of the relevant literature concerning writer voice and identity in writing as one of my research inquiries is to investigate how a writer positions him/herself in the PS. In particular, I draw on Ivanič's (1998) aspects of writer identity for this investigation.

Additionally, as I work with language data (i.e. students' PSs and participants' interviews), in this chapter I also discuss my analytic perspective on language (spoken and written texts). Here, my analysis of language aligns with a more functionalist perspective, and I have drawn on some analytical methods from discourse analysis. More specifically, Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse is introduced as it provides a useful approach for analysing students' PSs and conceptualises the relations between writers and readers through the mediation of texts. As I am primarily interested in what my participants have said in their interviews, I have adopted thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Burnard, 1991) to establish themes and coding categories that emerge from the interview data. Fairclough's (2003) concept of 'identification' is introduced to strengthen my analysis of the participants' talks in the interviews as it contributes to the understanding of their attitudes and assumptions concerning the PS.

In **Chapter 3**, I outline the overall research design and my research methods, which involve documentary analysis (i.e. students' PS texts) and in-depth semi-structured interviews with the students and academics. I provide details of the sampling strategies, data collection, and the procedures that were used to analyse different data sources. The interviewees were 22 doctoral students and 19 members of academics from the two focal universities, one UK-based and one US-based university. In this chapter, I also address some of the limitations that emerge in the process of data collection.

In this chapter, I offer an account of how I have approached different data sources by drawing on the varied analytical concepts that I have outlined in Chapter 2.

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Specifically, in relation to students' PSs, I have demonstrated how it is possible to apply Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse analysis to an examination of these documents. With regards to the interview data collected from students and academics at the two focal universities, I have shown how they were thematically coded in order to establish themes and categories in relation to my research questions. Fairclough's (2003) concept of 'identification' is also applied here to some interview data extracts in order to demonstrate how I investigate my participants' talks in the interviews.

Chapter 4 is the first of four analysis-based chapters in this thesis. This chapter presents an exploratory analysis of two doctoral students' PSs (Anna and Alice), and it provides a starting point for the investigation of my first research question, which examines how students position themselves in their PSs. In other words, this chapter focuses on an exploration of the PS texts as being products of a series of literacy events during students' writing processes. Here, I draw upon Hyland's metadiscoursal analytic categories to investigate potential relations amongst the student writers, the audience of the PS, and rhetorical context(s) in which the PS occurs through the textual realisation in PSs. Specifically, two types of metadiscoursal resources – 'interactive' (i.e. 'transitions', 'frame markers', 'endophoric markers', 'evidentials', 'code glosses') and 'interactional' resources (i.e. 'hedgers', 'boosters', 'attitude markers', 'self-mentions', 'engagement markers') – were used to examine the issue of the students' uses of metadiscoursal resources, which contributes to an understanding of how students project themselves in their PSs to manage their communicative intentions. In this chapter, I also discuss the issues that emerged in the process of operationalising the metadiscoursal analytical categories to analyse the PSs. Comparisons between Anna's and Alice's uses of metadiscoursal resources in their PSs are also discussed.

Chapter 5 extends the analysis in Chapter 4 by drawing upon Anna's case, to highlight the issues of writer identity that arose during the student's process of writing her PS for a UK-based postgraduate programme application. This chapter draws on Anna's interviews, which are concerned with her perceptions of the PS, her writing process and her self-reflective comments on her PS, to complement the metadiscourse analysis in Chapter 4. Ivanič's (1998) concepts of writer identity are

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applied here to interpret the various aspects of writer identity that Anna would bring to the act of writing.

In this chapter, I also explore the potential link between Anna's uses of metadiscoursal resources and their relation to writer identity and self-representation as presented in her PS. My findings suggest that the use of metadiscoursal resources, and more generally, the language in Anna's PS, are related to different aspects of writer identity (i.e. 'autobiographical self', 'discoursal self', 'self as author') which have emerged during the process of her composing the document. Specifically, I have found that the varied aspects of writer identity that Anna brings to the act of writing are associated with her assumptions of reader expectations, her perceptions of the communicative function of the PS, and her sense of being the author of her PS. This chapter aims to contribute to the understanding of how writers may position themselves in their PSs. The discussion of Anna's case highlights the unique features of the PS as a promotional genre for admissions. Specifically, the discussion in this chapter supports the argument that the PS is not just about textual features because it is also concerned with the representation of self so as to convince their readers that they are suitable candidates for study in their proposed field of study. Where appropriate, some of the findings shown in Chapter 5 will be focused upon for the discussion in Chapter 6 where I discuss a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984) about the contrasting assumptions made about the PS by Anna and the academics.

In **Chapter 6**, I move from the issues of writer identity to explore the assumptions of the students and academics about the PSs. This chapter focuses on participants at the focal UK-based university by drawing on interviews conducted with eight students and nine academics concerning their views towards the PS and the writing and evaluation practices that are associated with this type of text. The thematic analysis and Fairclough's notion of 'identification' were used here to analyse the interview data for the purposes of investigating the perceptions of students and academics about the PS. The discussion in this chapter also draws upon the notion of academic literacies, with reference to the three main perspectives ('study skills', 'academic socialisation', 'academic literacies') proposed by Lea and Street (1998); these

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provide useful lenses through which to view the account I give with regards to the exploration of writer-reader assumptions of the PS.

The interviews with academics suggest that they have clear views regarding what elements will produce a convincing PS. My discussion has shown that the perceptions of academics regarding the PS are associated with their assumptions about the nature of PhD study and the evaluation process of application documents. Such assumptions affect the meaning given to categories such as ‘motivation’ and ‘relevant information’; these terms were referred to by the academics concerning their expectations of the PS. The key finding derived from the student interviews is that many of these individuals actually place less value on the role of the PS in their applications. Such a view is associated with students’ consideration of the potential academics who would read their application as well as other parts of the documents in the application package, such as the research proposal. In fact, some of the students were already familiar with the academics during the application process so they felt they did not need to reveal too much personal information in their PS as they assumed that the academics may already know a lot about them. From the perspectives of the students, the PS is also considered to be less important than the research proposal in the doctoral application to UK-based universities as the students believe that the academics would focus less on their PS and more on their research proposal for the purposes of judging their suitability for a proposed field of study. Such a finding reinforces the importance of approaching student writing by considering the processes of meaning-making surrounding the text and contestation around meaning rather than as skills or deficit, as the ‘study skills’ perspective would suggest.

In this chapter, I have also drawn on a ‘telling case’ (Mitchell, 1984) of conflict across different perspectives on the PS concerning a student (Anna) and the academics evaluating her application. There were also varied perspectives amongst the academics, which draws attention to the fact that meanings are contested by the different parties involved, namely, academics and students, as suggested by the academic literacies perspective.

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Chapter 7 focuses upon interpretations of the PSs by students and academics, drawing on interviews with 14 students and 10 members of academics from the focal US-based university. This chapter uses the same analytical procedure that was used in Chapter 6. The key finding in this chapter reveals that perceptions of the academics in the focal US-based university regarding the PS are greatly influenced by the values of the institution they belong to. My interviews with the students indicate that although some perceptions of the PS from the students and academics are similar (e.g., ‘research interests’, ‘motivation for the study’), most of the students stated that PSs are challenging because it is difficult to figure out what information to include and what not to include. In response to this challenge, I draw on a ‘telling case’ (Mitchell, 1984) about a Chinese student (Tommy) and his PS for his doctoral application to the US-based university, to illustrate contrasting writer-reader expectations and interpretations of the PS. The discussions concerning Tommy’s case draw attention to the diversity of writer-reader views of the PS and reinforces the academic literacies perspective that “one explanation for problems in student writing might be the gaps between academic expectations and student interpretations of what is involved in student writing” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159). More specifically, this case argues that the reason for the contrasting views between Tommy and the academics may be as a result of his lack of familiarity with the ‘hidden features’ in the PS, such as ‘genre’ and ‘audience’, as suggested in Street’s (2009) recent accounts of what is considered to be a writing requirement. Like Chapter 6, this chapter highlights the issues concerning an inherent and often implicit imbalance of knowledge between the student writer and the academics that reveals “a more complex level than genre [...] but lay more deeply at the level of writing particular knowledge in a specific academic setting” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 163).

Chapter 8 discusses the findings in Chapters 6 and 7, aiming to investigate issues that are concerned with a wider institutional context for the student PS. This chapter draws on the perspectives of academic literacies with particular reference to the models of ‘study skills’, ‘academic socialisation’, and ‘academic literacies’ that are proposed by Lea and Street (1998). I also draw on notions of the ‘ideological’ model of literacy as a means for explaining the PS and how it is rooted in a particular

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context and embedded in “socially constructed epistemological principles” (Street, 2005, p. 12).

A comparison of assumptions made by students and academics concerning the PS for UK and US postgraduate programme applications suggests that although, at first glance, some themes/descriptive categories (e.g., research interest) appear to be similar, the ideology and epistemology emerging from each specific institutional context has affected the meaning given to these themes. In other words, these themes cannot be simply treated as “common-sense ways of knowing” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 168) as they may be imbued with varied conceptual understandings across different contexts, as the academic literacies perspective has suggested. In other words, some of these themes that I have identified in this thesis are not generic and transferable. This finding reinforces the view that “the notion of generic ‘transferable skills’ has been challenged” (Gourlay, 2009). Discussions of assumptions made by the students and academics about the PS across two institutional contexts suggest that the way in which the students and academics perceive the PS is constructed and influenced by its distinct institutional and epistemological context.

Chapter 9 summarises the key findings in relation to my research questions. I have also proposed some theoretical and methodological implications for a traditional genre-based approach to the study of the PS. My main argument is that the genre analysis of the PS should be done in conjunction with other forms of analysis, such as an academic literacies approach, in order to reach a better understanding of this type of text. I have also detailed how the findings in my thesis can contribute to a new understanding, building from what has been found by existing genre studies on the PS. In this chapter, I also draw attention to some pedagogical implications for instructing students about the PS in particular and academic writing more generally from the lens of the academic literacies perspective. Specifically, such a perspective allows us to approach meanings as contested amongst the different parties involved: student applicants, academics and institutional contexts. The different perspectives offered by the students and the academics that emerge in this thesis can, in turn, serve as useful teaching material to be used in classes for students to discuss. This outcome would enhance students’ awareness of their readers and the target discourse

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community, and allow them to gain an understanding of a specific cultural and institutional context in which a particular type of text occurs.

In this final chapter, I address some limitations of the current study and provide some suggestions for future research on student academic writing. I have made some concluding points at the end of this thesis by drawing on my experiences of applying for PhD studies a couple of years ago, and what I have learned by conducting this research.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 – Personal Statement for admission to Higher Education

This chapter aims to provide the background and rationale for the current study on the Personal Statement (PS). In this chapter, I discuss the role of the PS in the admissions processes. I also introduce the concepts of genre as the existing studies on the PS have approached this type of text under the concept of genre and have classified the PS as a type of academic promotional genre.

This chapter also includes a review of the existing genre studies on applicants' PSs in relation to their research focus, analytical approaches and the key findings. This review has shown that the majority of the existing studies have approached and framed the PS within the field of English for specific/academic purposes (ESP/EAP) and have adopted Swales' (1996) genre-based rhetorical move analysis to examine the rhetorical structures and linguistic features of the PSs for different programmes of study. These studies have revealed that the conventions of PSs vary across different programmes of study. However, little attention has been paid to other writing conventions of the PS, such as writer identity, writer-reader relationships and institutional epistemology. The PS has also been considered as an example of 'occluded genres' that are "typically hidden, 'out of sight' or 'occluded' from the public gaze by a veil of confidentiality" (Swales, 1996, p. 46). For this reason, it may increase extra challenges for applicants when they compose a PS for a university application. The challenges of composing this type of text are also discussed in this chapter.

In this chapter, I also include the details of the findings and discussions from my small-scale exploratory study of two graduate students' PSs for their PhD study application for the US-based universities. The purpose of this small-scale exploratory study was to see how far I could get from genre-based rhetorical move-step analysis for PSs and examine how it could help with sharpening the focus for the current main study. The reflections on this small-scale exploratory study and a discussion on the problems of the existing genre analysis and theory in relation to the exploration of the PS have led to the identification of 'research gaps' in the field. At the end of this chapter, the focus of the main study is introduced and the theoretical

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and methodological perspective and approaches that I have drawn upon to fill in these ‘gaps’ are also signalled.

1.1 The Personal Statement as a genre

1.1.1 The role of the Personal Statement in admissions

In addition to the results of their standardised scores, applicants may find that they are competing with other applicants based on the content of their PSs, as well as their reference letters or resumes, all of which play important roles during the selection process (Fitzsimmons, 1991; Kilgore, 2004; Hawkins & Clinedinst, 2006). The PS is classified as a type of the occluded genre in the academy as it is often viewed as private and confidential to each individual applicant (Swales, 1996). It has also been considered as a self-promotional genre in the sense that the purpose of this type of text is to promote the quality and credibility of the applicants and persuade the readers to grant admission for their entry to their proposed course of study. The notion of genre will be discussed in section 1.1.2 and followed by a review of the existing genre studies on the PSs in section 1.1.3.

As I have mentioned in the preface, the PS may be the only place for applicants to write and express themselves through their own words such as their motivation for applying for a particular programme/discipline, their qualifications and qualities that are relevant for the course, and professional goals after the completion of the study. In light of this, the academics may wish to know something about the applicants that will not have been revealed through other parts of the application document such as academic transcripts and references. For instance, in their study on the PSs for the medical school applications, Bekins et al. (2004) have argued that, “the primary purpose of the [Personal Statement] is to highlight the personal qualities and achievements that grades, recommendation letters, and MCAT [Medical College Admissions Test] scores do not reveal” (p. 56). Bekins et al. also revealed a comment made by an academic regarding the evaluation process for applications to medical school: “we’re pretty certain from grades and test scores of an applicant’s ability to succeed in med school. What we can’t tell from grades and scores, though, is whether the applicant will thrive in a medical career. That’s where the [Personal Statement] comes in” (p. 58).

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Ding (2007) also revealed that two academics who were taking charge of the admissions processes at a medical school stated that they wish to see the statements in the PS “go beyond a basic desire to help people” (p. 372). In Ding’s article, she also interpreted that this type of statement such as ‘enjoying helping people’, from the academics’ perspectives whom she interviewed, may be considered as a kind of cliché. In light of these examples found in the existing studies, it is evident that applicants must think carefully about what to include in their PSs and which points to emphasise about their personal qualities in order to distinguish themselves from a pool of applicants. They should also give evidence of their uniqueness rather than simply listing and repeating information that has already been included on other documents such as transcripts of official exam scores (Swales, 2009).

According to Vossler (2007), PSs are usually used to help the academics make final decisions regarding which applicants should be allowed entry into a course. This is especially the case when so many of the applicants have high grades and test scores, and the admissions committee finds it difficult to select one applicant over another. As a crucial part of the admissions process, the PS may help the committee determine which candidates will be selected and which will be rejected. Barton et al. (2004) indicate that a well-written and strong PS will increase the applicant’s chances of getting admission into his/her chosen course; on the other hand, a poorly written PS may result in him/her being immediately rejected from a course. The discussion in this section reveals the interactive character of the PS and its communicative purpose for admissions. The next section will discuss the concepts of genre to sketch a brief overview of it as the PS is often explored by drawing on the concepts of genre and its theory and analysis in the existing literature.

1.1.2 The concepts of genre

Over the past two decades, the term genre has come to be thought of, “as referring to a sociolinguistic activity in which the participants are able to achieve particular goals” (Henry & Roseberry, 2001, p. 153). Swales defines genre as:

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A class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. (Swales, 1990, p. 58)

His conceptualisation of the discourse community as the parent of the genre indicates the idea that a genre is shaped and used by a group of people in a specific discourse community in which they have shared some common goals, ways of intercommunication, and specific language uses to achieve certain communicative purposes through “socio-rhetorical” activities of writing and hence it reveals a certain threshold level to the outsiders (Swales, 1990, pp. 24-27). Within this framing, it can be inferred that the rhetorical patterns of similarity for a genre can be identified in terms of its “structure, style, content and intended audience” and such recurrent patterns are considered as “prototypical by the parent discourse community” (ibid. p. 58).

Whilst aligning themselves with Swales’ theoretical standpoint, many researchers in the field of applied linguistics have adopted his rhetorical move-step analysis to investigate the typical rhetorical structures and the linguistic features of a particular genre (Dudley-Evans, 1994; Thompson, 2001a; Bunton, 2005). For example, the components of research articles have been studied: the abstract (Salager-Meyer, 1990), the methodology (Wood, 1982), the results (Brett, 1994; Williams, 1999), and the discussion section (Dudley-Evans, 1994) as well as thesis/dissertations (Dudley-Evans, 1986; Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Swales, 1990; Thompson, 1999a; Bunton, 2005). The cross-cultural and interdisciplinary variation in genres has also been explored (Hyland, 2000; Thompson, 2001a; Connor & Mauraanen, 1999). These studies also examine the social actions these textual features perform in a particular context and proceed to provide a useful framework for a particular genre in order to help students or various types of professionals who communicate in English for specific/academic purposes. From a language teaching perspective, the notion of genre in ESP/EAP has been regarded as a useful and powerful analytic and

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pedagogical tool in researching and teaching for academic and other professional institutions (Swales, 1990; Hyland, 2004).

For the move-step analysis, a ‘move’ can be viewed as a ‘rhetorical movement’ (Swales, 1990, p. 140), from one part of a text to another, in which each move serves a particular communicative function in order to achieve a particular communicative purpose of the genre (Holmes, 1997; Swales, 1990). On the other hand, a ‘step’ (some scholars prefer to use the term ‘strategy,’ *see* Bhatia, 1993; Henry & Roseberry, 2001) is viewed as specific approaches to implement each ‘move’. For instance, in the PSs written by applicants for graduate programme applications, a typical rhetorical move that is identified in the existing genre studies on the PSs is the ‘Introduction’ move. However, the steps that are embedded in the ‘Introduction’ move can be varied. For instance, some applicants may make statements concerning their decision or motivation to apply for a specific programme/discipline; some may provide their background information such as their previous education and other relevant experiences. In other words, applicants may adopt different steps/strategies to attract readers’ attention in the ‘Introduction’ move (Henry & Roseberry, 2001).

This rhetorical move-step analysis has been developed by Swales (1981, 1984) in his seminal work on the study of research article introductions. He identifies a three-move structure and the steps that are embedded in each move – ‘establishing a territory’ (steps: ‘claiming centrality’, ‘making topic generalisation’, ‘reviewing items of previous research’); ‘establishing a niche’ (steps: ‘counter-claiming’, ‘indicating a gap’, ‘question-raising’, ‘continuing a tradition’); and ‘occupying the niche’ (steps: ‘outlining purposes’, ‘announcing present research’, ‘announcing principal findings’, ‘indicating research article structure’) – to describe the schematic pattern for the introductions in research articles. This model, which Swales has developed with the use of move-step analysis, is called CARS (Create a Research Space) model for research article introductions. This model provides an effective foundation for the structural organisation of introductions for research texts. Following Swales’ work, many researchers have widely applied move-step analysis to different types of genre (Dudley-Evans, 1994; Samraj, 2002, 2005; Paltridge, 2002; Zeng, 2009; Salom et al., 2008).

Traditionally, genres have been viewed as ritualised activities in writing with respect to their stable generic structures and linguistic features; a contemporary notion of genre shifts the focus toward fluidity and dynamics (Chandler, 2000). Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) claimed that genres are usually viewed as “sites of contention between stability and change. They are inherently dynamic, constantly (if gradually) changing over time in response to the socio-cognitive needs of individual users” (p. 6). Echoing Berkenkotter and Huckin’s point, Bhatia (2000) also pointed out that “generic forms are rather dynamic in a number of ways” (p. 147). Although genre analysis in ESP/EAP research is concerned with the relationships between the social functions and context, and the textual features of a genre, the focus remains heavily upon the text itself and is less concerned with its “surrounding social contexts” (Hyon, 1996, p. 695).

1.1.3 Genre studies on Personal Statements

The few studies I have found that have investigated applicants’ PSs are similar to the existing genre studies on academic texts in the field of ESP/EAP; they have mostly adopted Swales’ rhetorical move-step analysis (*see* the detailed discussions in section 1.1.2) to investigate successful/unsuccessful PSs. These studies reveal that various textual and linguistic features are identifiable in PSs across different programmes of study. The existing studies on PSs are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Brown (2004) has conducted a rhetorical study that focuses on PSs for a clinical psychology doctoral programme. The purpose was to identify the distinct features of statements by students that were admitted into universities, against those who were rejected. Combining quantitative and qualitative methods, he coded and analysed a selection of 18 PSs (9 successful ones and 9 unsuccessful ones). The findings revealed that “successful applicants attended more to projecting their future research endeavours and demonstrating their commitments to scientific epistemology” (p. 242). Specifically, it would appear that, on average, the successful applicants dedicated more space to expressing their research interests and experiences for graduate study, and also included far fewer details of practical experiences, such as

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volunteering or paid work. Apart from this analysis of students' PSs, Brown has also conducted interviews with faculty members of the clinical psychology department to supplement his analysis on PSs.

However, in contrast to the results outlined in Brown's study (2004), Bekins et al. (2004) has indicated that the PSs for residency applications to medical schools tend to emphasise that applicants connect their practical experiences (self-reflection) and use them to frame their interests and capabilities for succeeding in the completion of a course in medicine. Bekins et al. also adopted a genre-based move-step approach to analyse students' PSs, survey medical school applicants, and interview faculty members. The purpose of this study was to investigate how students tend to interpret the PSs. It also examined how faculty members perceive such texts. The results of Bekins et al.'s study are consistent with those of Barton et al. (2004). Barton et al.'s study looked at 169 PSs from three medical residency applications for a US-based university, and considered self-representation in PSs. It also discussed differences between its findings with those in Brown's study. Regarding the PSs in medicine, they concluded that, "the textual and rhetorical presentation and reception of the self in the personal statement for residency focuses on the personal" (Barton et al., 2004, p. 76). However, in Brown's study, it was claimed that in the more successful PSs, students tend to construct a research persona for themselves. That is, the PSs with more research-oriented content are preferable. In other words, self-reflection in clinical psychology is far less important than shaping "convincing professional identities committed to a clear research agenda" (Brown, 2004, p. 245).

Further, the variations of PSs across disciplines have been examined by Samraj and Monk (2008). They analysed PSs that have been collected for applications to three masters' programmes (linguistics; business administration; and electrical engineering) at a US-based university. The move-step analysis has been used to study the three sets of data for their rhetorical structures, based on previous work on genre analysis (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990). Their study indicates that the generic structure of PSs taken from the three disciplines may consist of similar rhetorical moves; nevertheless, the steps embedded in each move are different. Moreover, it also investigated the views of specialists, such as graduate advisors, or faculty members, who were in

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charge of the admissions process for a department. Unlike Brown's (2004) study on the doctoral programme in psychology, Samraj and Monk's study revealed that the 'move of research focus' is not apparent in the PSs studied in their research. Additionally, Samraj and Monk (2008) also indicated "the statements written for master's programmes also do not foreground the personal self as in the case of statements written to medical residency programmes" (p. 208) as studied by Barton et al. (2004).

Amongst the few studies that I have found, Ding (2007) appears to be the one (if any) focusing on both move analysis and the analysis of the lexical features of the PSs. In Ding's study, 30 online PSs from medical/dental schools were collected from their respective websites, which included 20 successful PSs and 10 unsuccessful or unedited PSs. This study sought to identify moves used by medical/dental schools and to examine the differences between the successful and unsuccessful PSs. The findings show that five recurrent moves and some lexical features can be identified. Although Ding's study has examined both functional moves and linguistic information, it is still constrained by the fact that the PSs studied were collected from public websites. For this reason, several aspects that could have influenced the interpretation of these PSs may not be identifiable. For example, the background of the individual writer of each PS cannot be established. Some may be written by native-English speakers and some by those whose English is a foreign/second language. In this case, the results may not be convincing if these PSs are analysed purely in terms of their textual features, without consideration of the writers and other sociocultural factors. These practical constraints were also indicated by Ding herself.

In light of the various discrepancies that have been discussed above, it can be said that the genre analysis of PSs reveals the distinct features of PSs submitted for different disciplines and academic discourse communities. However, it appears that the majority of existing studies focus mainly on the text itself rather than on people who actually interact with the PS, such as student writers and academics as readers. This refers to what Bruce Horner (1999) calls the 'textual bias', which criticises the text/writing solely as a linguistic object. There is relatively little consideration of

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other issues, such as: how applicants position themselves at different stages of writing; how applicants' interpretations of PSs influence the ways in which they use their linguistic choices; the various difficulties applicants may encounter throughout the writing process; and how academics respond to the applicants' PSs. In other words, many of the features and conventions of the PS such as, identity and power relations, writer-reader interpretations of the PS, and the effects of institutional ideology and epistemology on PS texts, still remain implicit so applicants may need to rely on guesswork and basically imagine the unknown expectations of the targeted academic discourse community.

1.2 The challenges of writing a Personal Statement

As can be seen from section 1.1, the existing studies revealed that the writing features and conventions of PSs vary across different programmes of study (Bekins et al., 2004; Brown, 2004; Ding, 2007; Samraj & Monk, 2008). In other words, there may be different criteria for judging applicants' PSs according to the requirements of each discipline. Such disciplinary variations increase the challenges for applicants in the sense that applicants need to know what is most important and valuable to the individual discipline in a particular academic discourse community. I have discussed some of the challenges that applicants may encounter when they compose their PSs from a review of some of the existing studies on the PS as follows:

1.2.1 Page limits

The PSs are quite short in length, typically around two pages long (Swales, 2009). This constraint implies that applicants must carefully consider what content to include in their PS, as well as how to best present themselves while using the given word limit most effectively. In general, a short set of instructions of what should be addressed in PSs is provided to applicants in school websites. For example, one of the instructions to the PS writing extracted from a US-based university website for admissions is as follows:

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The online application system supports the electronic submission of the [Personal Statement]¹. All degree applicants are required to write a [Personal Statement], which should be no more than 750 words. It should address the factors that have encouraged you to seek an education from *California Golden University (This is a pseudonym for the university)*. You may also wish to describe your background, significant personal and professional experiences related to your program of study, important aspects of your academic record, and your professional goals upon completion of your desired program.

Based on the above application information, applicants may gain a brief idea of what needs to be included in their PSs in relation to the content. However, as the lack of guidelines regarding how to present the content and which style/voice will best meet the audience's expectations, applicants may still feel uneasy about how to compose the PS.

1.2.2 Issues of access to authentic and successful PSs

Compared with other academic publications, such as journal articles and dissertations, the authentic and successful PS is relatively difficult to get access to as applicants cannot “easily get access to the graduate student files to see what other students wrote in their [Personal Statements]” (cited in Barton & Brown, 2004, p. 8). Without a clear idea of what academics expect from them, applicants are forced to second-guess what the criteria might be. Under these circumstances, applicants may often search for information on Internet websites on how to write a successful PS, and examples of templates for them to follow. However, the information they find might not be correct and the examples of models might not be specific enough to meet the requirements of a particular programme. In other words, some information may be very general and not target any specific discipline of study (Samraj & Monk, 2008). If applicants base their PSs on inadequate examples of models, they risk much and there is a strong possibility that their applications will be rejected (Barton & Brown, 2004). Vossler (2007) also states that one of the difficulties that applicants always encounter is that PS writing is not taught in university courses in the US and

¹ Statement of Purpose was the term used in this extract. Here, I have changed it to the Personal Statement for the purpose of keeping it consistent throughout my thesis.

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thus, examples of successful PSs are not usually available for applicants to observe and learn from. As a result, it may leave applicants struggling with how to compose this type of text and also, a point from which and how to start (Brown, 2004).

1.2.3 Audience expectations/writer-reader power relationship

Apart from the challenge of trying to manage the content of the PS within a specified word/page limit, applicants may also encounter the issues of how to meet the potential audience's expectations. Swales and Feak's (1994) idea that they have considered genre as a product of many perspectives, with the audience's expectation as the most crucial element has reinforced the challenging aspect of reader expectations.

Once applicants have read the brief instructions on the university's website, they have freedom to choose what will be included in the text and how they are going to express it using their own words. Whereas in some cases applicants will successfully meet the expectations of academics, it is more often the case that they will fail to meet the standard. As such, questions emerge: Do the PSs have fixed schematic structures and linguistic features for certain programmes in an academic community? What's the writing convention of the PS for a particular discipline of study or a specific academic discourse community? Ishop (2008) has stated that "depending upon the situation, prototypical [Personal Statements] may be quickly dismissed as ordinary, or conversely, the reader may have less tolerance for a writer whose essays take rhetorical risks" (p. 7; *see also* Brown, 2005). Such a statement seems to bring out the idea that the PS needs to be considered as on the one hand, standing out from a pool of applications and not falling into the category of 'typical'; and on the other hand, it needs to meet its writing convention, which is acceptable to the readers in the targeted discourse community. Ishop's statement also appears to reveal a "hidden agenda" (Bhatia, 1993; Brown, 2005) regarding the criteria of this type of text.

Also, the PS, to some extent, is "designed more to be exploited by the readers for their purposes rather than in benefiting the writer's intent" (Ishop, 2008, p. 8). Specifically, although PSs are controlled and composed by the applicants, this document will be judged by the academics whom applicants are unlikely to have

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ever met and who will judge applicant's suitability according to their own set of criteria. Thus, applicants may not know exactly what is expected from them. For these reasons, applicants are put "in an unusually awkward position when asked to expose private aspects of the self" (Paley, 1996, p. 86). Applicants may think of themselves as being caught in an uneasy situation, which Paley (1996) has termed a "rhetorical paradox" (p. 85). On the one hand, they are asked to compose their PSs freely. On the other hand, applicants are aware that potential academics will use their PSs to judge whether or not they are qualified for entry into a proposed course of study.

In addition, the assessors of PSs will have already read hundreds of PSs and, no doubt, these will have shaped their ideas regarding what counts as a good and qualified PS. In comparison, applicants will have written only a few PSs in their educational careers and will have read even fewer (Brown, 2004). Applicants will usually not be told what the academics think of their PSs (Tobin, 1993). In a situation where their application might have been rejected once already and they have the opportunity to reapply to the same programme and university, they would not know how to amend or modify their PSs or other documents in order to improve their chances of selection the second time round. Without feedback, applicants tend to fall into a complex rhetorical situation, where the power of academics overshadows that of the applicant writers (Hatch, Hill, & Hayes, 1993; Paley, 1996; Brown, 2004, 2005). From these examples, it becomes apparent that there may be mismatches between the expectations of applicants and academics. In light of this, it can be said that the PSs are not just about linguistic features and rhetorical structures; it is also about the importance of understanding the conventions and institutional practices across institutional contexts.

1.2.4 Cultural differences in writing the PS

Another challenge of writing a PS may be due to the issues of cultural values and norms (Barton & Brown, 2004). For instance, in a conversation that he had with several scholars, Swales stated that the risks surrounding applicants' PSs tend to include mismatches between what applicants think their readers will expect from reading their PSs, and what the readers believe is most important and should be

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included. Specifically, Swales has mentioned that in PSs written by applicants from the Middle East, India, Africa, the conclusion tends to be an appeal for pity; one such example reads: “if you don’t admit me, I will have no hope whatsoever left in life, and I will remain impoverished under this palm tree forever and ever” (cited in Barton & Brown, 2004, p. 11). Swales also states that many Asian applicants also like to mention their personal rankings in academic performance; statements such like: “I came 14th out of 906” or “I was number three in my class” (cited in Barton & Brown, 2004, p. 11). Swales (2009) also expressed his observation and experiences of reading numerous PSs written by applicants from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, he has stated the differences between the PSs from Britain and from the US (Swales, 2009, p. 9):

[PSs²] from Britain: Because of traditional UK PhD student profiles, a preponderance of very specific research proposals, such as “I would like to analyse anti-accusative structures in serial verbs in Khmer, especially as they occur in personal narratives of those with only an elementary school education.” These are sometimes taken as an affront by my colleagues, along the lines of this kind of reaction: “How can she decide on this particular topic before taking my course on the syntax of Southeast Asian languages?”

[PSs] from the US: Often an attempt to show interest in everything: “I am interested in generative syntax, nasalization, Jamaican creoles, cross-cultural semiotics, and neurolinguistics. Also namedropping is common, as in “I took syntax with Chomsky.”

Swales has considered the variations described above may be a result of different cultural ways of thinking and approaching the PS (cited in Barton & Brown, 2004). For instance, for the statements about academic rankings written by many Asian applicants, this may be associated with the educational background in which they are socially and historically based. Specifically, the Asian educational system puts heavy emphasis on students’ academic performance/rankings on examinations (Yamamoto

² Swales has used SOPs that represent the Statement of Purpose in his article. Here, I have changed it to Personal Statement (PS) for the purpose of keeping it consistent throughout my thesis.

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& Brinton, 2010). In light of this situation, it can be inferred that applicants may consider this type of information is important for them and they envision presumably it will sound appealing to the readers. In response to the statements about the ranking in students' PSs, Feak commented that "[applicants] think that if they were number one, they automatically should be admitted" (cited in Barton & Brown, 2004, p. 11). Swales, as well as Feak, revealed that such statements made by applicants will not really appeal to the academics when they come to read their PSs (ibid.). In a similar vein, McKay (1996) indicated that cultural context can influence how a topic is developed. McKay also makes reference to a comparative study by Hu, Brown and Brown (1982) to illustrate that applicants with different cultural backgrounds possess various cultural assumptions and role expectations when they approach a particular genre. Similarly, Street (1991) has approached academic literacy in terms of sociocultural perspectives, referring to what he calls an 'ideological model of literacy' in which literacy practices are culturally and socially embedded. Street's views toward literacy will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

1.2.5 The opaque selection/admissions processes

For graduate study applications, the admissions processes are usually invisible to the applicants. That means applicants may not be clear about the role of each part of the application documents. Specifically, as the PS serves as only one part of the application for admissions, it can be inferred that other parts of the application document may also play their part during the process of selection and potentially have a connection with the PS. In fact, in Samraj and Monk's (2008) work on the PS for different disciplines at a university in the US, they have pointed out that some of the faculty whom they interviewed in their study have stated that "the quality of the statement would generally be in line with the judgments that the admissions committee reached based on the other admission information such as graduate record examination (GRE)³ scores and letters of recommendation" (p. 199). In their article, Samraj and Monk (2008) also reported that some of the faculty at the three disciplines (i.e. linguistics, business administration and electrical engineering) they

³ The Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) is a standardised test that is an admissions requirement for many graduate schools in the United States.

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have interviewed expressed that under some circumstances, they may take the students whose PSs do not meet their expectations completely but have other strong points against other selection criteria. From this perspective, it seems to imply that the role of the PS may not be always straightforward in the application process as the admissions committee may judge an applicant's suitability based on the whole application rather than the PS alone (Samraj & Monk, 2008). In fact, Feak also commented that writing a PS is a "tough thing, because it filters into all sorts of things other than just the [Personal Statements], things like trying to understand the admissions process in general" (cited in Barton & Brown, 2004, p. 11).

1.3 The limitations of genre-based rhetorical move-step analysis: A small-scale exploratory study on two graduate students' Personal Statements

Prior to my main study, I also conducted a small-scale exploratory study of two graduate students' PSs for their doctoral applications in the field of education to the US-based universities (*see* Appendix 1 for more details of the findings and discussions). The purpose of this small-scale exploratory study is twofold: firstly, I would like to see how far I can get from a genre-based move-step analysis on the PSs as such an approach has been widely applied to the study of the PS. Secondly, I acknowledged that some implicit concepts may not be easily noticeable in the preliminary round of data collection and analysis. This small-scale exploratory study would allow me to sharpen the overall research design and to identify other potential useful theoretical and analytical concepts for the main study. A reflection on this small-scale exploratory study will be discussed at the end of this section.

Two graduate students from the field of education were recruited and their PSs and writing experiences of this type of text were investigated in this small-scale exploratory study. The questions that I investigated are as follows:

- What content has been made in the two focal graduate students' PSs?
- Did these two graduate students compose their PSs differently and, if so, how did they approach their PSs?
- What issues did students encounter during the writing processes of their PSs?
- What other issues have emerged in this small-scale exploratory study?

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To explore the research questions as shown above, three sources of data were collected in this small-scale exploratory study: four PSs written by two MA students (Ashley and Anita) who were pursuing a Ph.D. in the field of applied linguistics in the United States (including the first and final drafts from each student; *see* Appendix 2 for the full version of the two students' PS drafts); interviews with the students; and the written feedback on the students' PSs given by a professor who assisted them with their PSs. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the students' assumptions of what would be required in composing a PS, in-depth interviews with the students were conducted face-to-face, which lasted about 20-30 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The feedback given by the professor who helped them with their PSs was collected in two different ways. In the case of Ashley, I collected her notes and journal entries as she had discussed her PS with the professor in meetings; she provided notes she had taken in their meetings. On the other hand, Anita did not have the chance to meet the professor to discuss her PS and so she sought help via emails. As such, I collected evidence of the email communications between them.

As I wanted to 'test' the extent to which genre-based move-step analysis can help me understand students' PSs, I used a move-step genre analysis to analyse the rhetorical structures of two focal students' PSs. Specifically, I drew upon Samraj and Monk's (2008) move-step framework to identify the key rhetorical choices and structures used by each student. Table 1.1 below summarises the moves and steps that Samraj and Monk (2008) have identified from the PSs:

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Table 1.1 Moves and steps in Personal Statements (Samraj and Monk, 2008, p. 201)

	Ling. (12)	Elec. Eng. (9)	Bus. (14)
<i>Introduction</i>			
Generalization	2	2	4
Background	2	5	5
Goals or decision to apply	8	7	9
Total	10	7	11
<i>Background</i>			
General (Family/Travel etc.)	0	2	3
Work	10	4	11
Education	11	8	8
Research	1	8	0
Personal attributes	1	0	3
Total	12	9	14
<i>Reasons for applying</i>			
Gap in background	5	2	10
Positive gains (incl. interests)	9	7	12
Program/university attributes	8	6	8
Disciplinary and research reasons	3	7	2
Total	12	9	14
<i>Extra-curricular information</i>	0	5	2
<i>Conclusion</i>			
Goals and/or prediction of future	7	7	10
Self evaluation	6	3	8
Total	9	7	12

In order to reach an in-depth understanding of the students' assumptions of the PSs and their writing processes, findings that were derived from the text analysis were used as the basis of interviews with the students (text-based interviews). Specifically, students were invited to comment on their own PSs. The interview and feedback data collected served to supplement the results from the analyses of two students' PS texts.

1.3.1 Findings and discussions of the small-scale exploratory study

My analysis has revealed the different rhetorical considerations from the two students and the difficulties that they encountered during their writing processes. Another interesting issue that emerged from the data is the power and authority relations between the students and their professor during the revision process. I will discuss some of these findings in the following sections.

Move-step rhetorical structure in Ashley's and Anita's PSs

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Table 1.2 below is a modified framework based on the two students' (Ashley and Anita) PSs in this small-scale exploratory study; it adapts Samraj and Monk's (2008) move-step structures in PSs. Five generic moves were identified in my data: *Introduction*; *Credentials*; *Reasons for applying*; *Future goals*; and *Conclusion*. The focal PSs in this small-scale exploratory study consist of the same rhetorical moves but differ in terms of the steps associated with each move. Furthermore, the sequences that identify each of the moves and steps tend to vary in these two PSs. Each move and its underlying steps are described in the following section, and the examples for each move and step are drawn from the two focal students' PSs.

Table 1.2 Moves and steps in two focal student's PSs

Moves	Definition
Move 1: Introduction	The applicant states the decision to apply or the applicant's goals in doing so.
Step 1-A: Synopsis of personal background and general observation	The applicant describes her research interest by giving a synopsis about the personal background or stating a general observation on current situations. Note: Not specifically expressing the decision to apply (indirect signalling).
Step 1-B: Goals or decision to apply	The applicant states the decision to apply Note: This step is more direct compared with Step 1-A.
Move 2: Credentials	The applicant establishes credentials related to the fields of education or uses her background to justify why she finds the programme desirable.
Step 2-A: Research experiences	The applicant reviews relevant research experiences.
Step 2-B: Academic achievements	The applicant reveals academic achievements related to the proposed field of study.
Step 2-C: Professional experiences	The applicant discusses professional experiences (e.g., internship, teaching experiences).
Move 3: Reasons for applying	The applicant explains reasons for pursuing the proposed study.

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Step 3-A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation	The applicant gives reason for academic interests in applied linguistics based on her observations or experiences.
Step 3-B: Disciplinary and research reasons	The applicant states how the target programme meets her interests and gives reasons for pursuing future education in order to continue the training and interdisciplinary research in the target programme.
Step 3-C: Programme/university attributes	The applicant describes what is appealing about the programme in terms of the faculty research interests, course offerings, and specialisations offered.
Move 4: Future (career) goals after completion of the programme	The applicant states future study/career goals.
Step 4-A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation / contribution	The applicant states future study/career goals by describing personal observations, experiences and potential contribution.
Move 5: Conclusion	The applicant refers to the university's reputation or emphasises again the uniqueness that makes her a qualified candidate.
Step 5-A: Goals and/or prediction of future	The applicant restates the short and long term goals, which might be included as a hopeful prediction for success.
Step 5-B: Self-promotion	The applicant makes one last attempt to sell herself by summing up all the attributes to convince the reader why the programme should admit the applicant.
Step 5-C: Understanding of the proposed study/programme	The applicant describes her understanding of the proposed study, such as courses offered by the programme.

Note: The listed move-steps in Table 1.2 are not in a sequential order except for the moves of introduction and conclusion. The move-step structures vary between the two focal students' PSs.

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Move 1: Introduction

This move is the opening section of PSs. Its purpose is to attract potential readers' attention. The introduction is usually the most crucial part of PSs as it may determine the first impression of potential audiences (Ishop, 2008; Barton et al., 2004). It is therefore a big challenge for applicants to write this move properly and at the same time, make it appealing. There are two rhetorical strategies to fulfil the purpose of Introduction move, based on the two focal students' PSs.

Step 1-A: Synopsis of personal background and general observations

In this step, the applicant describes her research interest by summarising her personal background or by stating a general observation on current situation pertaining to her research direction. See Excerpt 1.1 below:

Excerpt 1.1

I have always been fascinated by the diversity of language and culture. This curiosity drew me to study languages as a young university student, and to double major in English and Japanese. Not only did I learn to speak these two languages, but I also learned a great deal about cultural patterns enacted through language, and I was fascinated by the differences I found. This interest became even more apparent to me when I took a course on the ways in which English is used worldwide. My studies in this area revealed to me not only the vast linguistic similarities and differences in English across cultures and communities, but also how language served as a context for the understanding and appreciation of cultural distinctions. *(From Ashley)*

In Excerpt 1.1, the applicant explains that she double majored in two languages during her bachelor studies and mentions her interests in language and culture. To some extent, it performs the function of a personal narration.

Step 1-B: Goals or decision to apply

The applicant explicitly states the goals or decision to apply for the proposed field of study. See Excerpt 1.2 below:

Excerpt 1.2

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I am applying to the PhD program in applied linguistics in order to broaden my perspective of language acquisition in L2 learners. More specifically, I am interested in English writing for specific purposes. English has emerged as a lingua franca, used as a communications medium in an increasingly global world, both in social and professional contexts. As a result, the need to write effectively and concisely in English has become urgent and necessary. (*From Anita*)

Excerpt 1.2 actually contains steps 1-A and 1-B. The first sentence of Excerpt 1.2 clearly states the programme (applied linguistics), which the applicant wants to pursue. Further, she expresses a general observation and remarks on the issue of English as a lingua franca and further highlights the needs of English writing for specific purposes.

Move 2: Credentials

In Credentials move, the applicants establish credentials related to the fields of education or use their research, academic, and professional backgrounds to justify why they find the programme desirable, wanting to persuade the potential readers that they are qualified for the proposed study.

Step 2-A: Research experiences

In this step, the applicant reviews and discusses her research experiences pertaining to her chosen programme. The applicant states what she believes to be attributes that make her attractive to the programme. See Excerpt 1.3 below:

Excerpt 1.3

As a senior, I discovered my passion for the analysis of language and communication while conducting research on medical discourse for my thesis writing course. Although this was my first research project, I quickly realized that the research process included diverse and complex activities. Nevertheless, through intensive and demanding guidance from my advisor, I overcame these challenging tasks. In addition to developing my knowledge of the research process, I learned how to work both independently and cooperatively. My first publicly recognized success in this endeavour occurred upon the acceptance of my paper on the analysis of doctor-patient

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communication in medical discourse for presentation at AAAL in California (2007). (*From Ashley*)

In Excerpt 1.3, the applicant states and discusses her first experience of conducting research in her undergraduate study. She also gives an example of recognised success in her work.

Step 2-B: Academic achievements

This step describes the applicant's academic achievements related to the proposed field of study. Commonly, applicants discuss highlights of their education. See Excerpt 1.4 below:

Excerpt 1.4

Through my study of TESOL, I have observed how language serves as a medium for mutual understanding and as a means for the appreciation of cultural differences. I realized that research in language and education is multidisciplinary: it blends elements of socio- and psycho- linguistics, a consideration for cultural phenomena, and also a practical teaching pedagogy. Language teachers with knowledge of different teaching approaches and a strong linguistic background are more likely to design lessons that are well-suited to students' needs. (*From Anita*)

Excerpt 1.4 expresses the applicant's academic experiences in the TESOL programme. She describes the importance of the multidisciplinary aspects she realised through her MA study.

Step 2-C: Professional experiences (e.g., internship; teaching experiences)

In this step, the applicant expresses her professional experiences. In my small PS corpus, the two PSs are for applied linguistics programme. It is commonly that the applicants state their previous or current teaching experiences. See Excerpt 1.5 below:

Excerpt 1.5

I have even had the opportunity to put my training into practice as a teacher. For my internship, I taught English in a non-profit

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organization. Through my experiences as a student, researcher, and teacher, I have come to understand that there is always a gap between theory and practice and that I can no longer assume a “one-size-fits-all” approach. (*From Ashley*)

In Excerpt 1.5, the applicant mentions her internship experiences during her MA study. In applied linguistics, it is always viewed as attributes to have language teaching experience.

Move 3: Reasons for applying

This is the key move in which applicants explain the reasons to pursue the proposed study and more broadly, reasons for the commitment to the field of study.

Step 3-A: Personal observations/experiences/evaluation

The applicant gives reasons for academic interests in applied linguistics based on her observations, experiences, or evaluation. See Excerpt 1.6 below:

Excerpt 1.6

As a L2 learner and ESL teacher, I observed many challenges that students encountered when they were writing essays for specific subjects. I realized that to become successful writers in a given discipline, learners not only need to acculturate to the discipline, but also have to learn the most effective and appropriate language structures per that correspond to institutional convention. Particularly in professional contexts, there is a high expectation for well-written English. In order to help students successfully participate in a target community, I desire to specialize in language research, focusing on providing learners with language education to meet the requirements. (*From Anita*)

Excerpt 1.6 states the applicant’s reasons for applying to the programme based on her previous observations and evaluations of students’ writing practices. She stresses the high demand for well-written English texts. Therefore she wants to pursue further study to help students with their academic writings.

Step 3-B: Disciplinary and research reasons

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The applicant states how the target programme meets her interests and gives reasons for pursuing future education in order to continue the training and interdisciplinary research in the target programme. See Excerpt 1.7 below:

Excerpt 1.7

I have come to realize the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and research. To develop this understanding, I have taken numerous courses in linguistics, languages, psychology, and education in my undergraduate and graduate courses of study. Now, I am looking for the opportunity to continue my training and interdisciplinary research. For this reason, I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Linguistics at the *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym), where I will be able to engage in research in an excellent academic environment where interdisciplinary research is apparent among the faculty. (*From Ashley*)

In Excerpt 1.7, the applicant states the importance of interdisciplinary research in the proposed field of study. She wants to pursue this further study to develop this understanding.

Sep 3-C: Programme/university attributes

The applicant describes the faculty research interests, course offerings, and specialisations offered in a particular programme. Here, the applicant does not just mention why she wants to pursue a doctoral degree in a particular discipline but also why she wants to pursue this particular programme. See Excerpt 1.8 below:

Excerpt 1.8

Now, I am looking for the opportunity to continue my training and interdisciplinary research. For this reason, I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Linguistics at the *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym), where I will be able to engage in research in an excellent academic environment where interdisciplinary research is apparent among the faculty. (*From Ashley*)

Excerpt 1.8 shows the reason why the applicant wants to pursue this particular programme by stating positive remarks on the institution's reputation.

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Move 4: Future (career) goals after completion of the programme

This move presents the applicants' future academic or career goals after successfully completing the programme. It is commonly done along with their strong motivations embedded in this move.

Step 4-A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation / contribution

The applicant states future study or career goals by describing personal observations, experiences, and potential contribution to the field of study. See Excerpt 1.9 below:

Excerpt 1.9

My goal for studying applied linguistics is to help L2 learners to reduce their learning difficulty with regard to language and cultural acquisition. Given my strong interest in L2 writing, I desire to explore prescriptive guidelines for teaching writing in professional contexts, and to help students to meet those expectations while retaining their unique individual voices. (*From Anita*)

In Excerpt 1.9, the applicant states that the future career goal is to reduce students' difficulty in learning language and culture and to assist them with their academic writing.

Move 5: Conclusion

This is the concluding move to end the PSs. Commonly, the applicants refer to the university's reputation, restate the future study goals or emphasise again the uniqueness that makes them qualified candidates. Three steps are found in this move. However, these steps are not completely independent themselves. These may be embedded or overlap with each other. Further explanations are as follows.

Step 5-A: Goals and/or prediction of future

The applicant restates the short and long term goals, which might include a hopeful prediction for success. See Excerpt 1.10 below:

Excerpt 1.10

(I) Being granted the opportunity to learn in this superb academic institution will allow me to develop a variety of skills that will better

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prepare me to achieve my goal of being a researcher, language educator, and policy maker par excellence, // (2) and although this program will undoubtedly present me with many challenges, my achievements and dedication demonstrate that I am prepared for this graduate program. (*From Ashley*)

It should be noted that this excerpt comprises two steps in one sentence: *goals or prediction of future*, and *self-promotion*. The first part of this sentence presents the applicant's potential achievement in the future. The second part shows the applicant's strong confidence in her capability of pursuing a Ph.D. in her chosen field of study.

Step 5-B: Self-promotion

The applicant makes one last attempt to sell herself by summing up all the attributes to convince the reader why the programme should admit the applicant. See Excerpt 1.11 below:

Excerpt 1.11

As a researcher with a broad background in theoretical linguistics, TESOL pedagogy, and practical teaching experience, I would be a productive Ph.D. candidate and make my own contribution to your program. (*From Anita*)

Excerpt 1.11 restates the applicant's suitability for the proposed field of study. She states her past academic and professional experiences to reinforce her capacity for studying in the target programme.

Step 5-C: Understanding of the proposed study/programme

The applicant describes her understanding of the proposed study, such as courses offered by the programme. See Excerpt 1.12 below:

Excerpt 1.12

With its combined training in theoretical and practical backgrounds, the Educational Linguistics Ph.D. program at the *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym) will help me develop my interests in research, teaching and applied linguistics. This program, with its renowned

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faculty and reputation in education and linguistics, is undoubtedly the best place for me to pursue further training. In this program, I will receive instruction from experts in cultural studies, language and acquisition, analysis of speech acts and discourse, language socialisation and development, and policy analysis and evaluation.
(*From Ashley*)

In Excerpt 1.12, the applicant mentions some training subjects such as language acquisition, cultural studies and so forth to demonstrate her understanding of the target programme.

In this text analysis on PSs, the five moves identified above, all occur in my data. Although these two PSs comprise the same rhetorical moves, they vary with embedded steps ('strategies') used to achieve rhetorical purposes for each move. The results obtained from the text content and move-step analysis are discussed as follows:

Comparison: Move-step structure between Ashley's and Anita's PSs (final draft)

Table 1.3 below illustrates the different structural sequences of Ashley's and Anita's PSs. Although five moves occur in both PSs, the steps embedded in each move are different.

Table 1.3 Structural sequences of the PSs (final draft)

Ashley's PS	Anita's PS
<i>Move 1 Introduction</i>	<i>Move 1 Introduction</i>
Step 1A: Gives a synopsis about the background	Step 1B: Goals or decision to apply
↓	Step 1A: Give a synopsis about the background?
<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>	↓
Step 3A: Personal observations/experiences/evaluation	<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>
↓	Step 3A: Personal observations/experiences/evaluation (e.g. the increasing need of experts in ESP)
<i>Move 4 Future (career) goals</i>	↓
Step 4A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation / contribution	<i>Move 4 Future (career) goals</i>
↓	Step 4A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation / contribution
<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>	↓
Step 3B: Disciplinary and research reasons	<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>
↓	Step 3B: Disciplinary and research reasons
<i>Move 2 Credentials</i>	↓
Step 2A: Research experiences	<i>Move 2 Credentials</i>
Step 2B: Academic achievements	Step 2A: Research experiences
Step 2C: Professional experiences (e.g., internship)	Step 2B: Academic achievements
↓	Step 2C: Professional experiences (e.g., teaching experiences)
<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>	↓
Step 3A: Personal observations/experiences/evaluation	<i>Move 5 Conclusion</i>
Step 3B: Disciplinary and research reasons	Step 5C: Understanding of the proposed study
Step 3C: Programme/university attributes	Step 5A: Goals and/or prediction of future
↓	Step 5B: Self-promotion
<i>Move 2 Credentials</i>	
Step 2B: Academic achievements	
↓	
<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>	
Step 3B: Disciplinary and research reasons	
Step 3C: Programme/university attributes	
↓	
<i>Move 5 Conclusion</i>	
Step 5A: Goals and/or prediction of future	
Step 5C: Understanding of the proposed study	
Step 5B: Self-promotion	

As shown in Table 1.3, the sequential order of Ashley's PS is *Introduction – Reasons for applying – Future goals – Reasons for applying – Credentials – Reasons for applying – Credentials – Reasons for applying – Conclusion* (Moves 1 – 3 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 3 – 2 – 3 – 5). On the other hand, Anita presents the pattern of *Introduction – Reasons for applying – Future Goals – Reasons for applying – Credentials –*

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Conclusion (Moves 1 – 3 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 5). These move structures indicate that each move may neither appear in any fixed order, nor merely occur once in any predictable sequence. They are referred to as different strategies and writing styles of the applicants.

In order to investigate the applicants' writing and revision processes, which are associated with the PS, the first and final drafts of two applicants' PSs were examined. Apart from the text analysis, the face-to-face interviews with the two students were conducted to supplement the results of the move-step analyses. The interviews have shown that the students encountered various issues such as writer-reader power relations and writer identity that they brought to the act of writing during their writing processes (*see* Appendix 1 for a detailed discussion of the analyses and findings).

1.3.2 Reflection on the small-scale exploratory study

To respond to my inquiry that centres on what genre-based move-step analysis can do for the investigation of the PSs, I have found that although move-step analysis proves useful in terms of identifying how students structure their PSs and the differences that emerge in the PSs, nonetheless, studying PSs merely from a textual perspective may be inadequate when it comes to analysing students' writing practices that are associated with this type of text. For instance, as I have discussed earlier in this section, the two focal students possessed the same moves in their PSs but used varied steps ('strategies') to fulfil each move. An analysis of the PS drafts for each student has also revealed shifts between drafts (*see* Appendix 1 for the detailed discussion). However, despite the fact that the differences amongst drafts produced by the same student or amongst different students can be observed from a point of move-step analysis, it is difficult to explain these differences shown in these texts without investigating applicants' intentions during the writing process. From this perspective, it can be inferred that many of the features and conventions of the PSs remain implicit, and this is linked to my other inquiry in this small-scale exploratory study that pays attention to the emergent issues that come from other sources of data (i.e. interview and feedback data) other than the PSs.

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It is evident that some issues were encountered by the students while composing their PSs. For instance, power and authority issues occurred between the students' advisor and the students in this small-scale exploratory study, where both focal students were found to possess a high affective factor (e.g., they experienced anxiety and nervousness when communicating with their advisor). Such a tension between the students and their advisor can be associated with the students' consideration of the audience's expectations (*see* Appendix 1 for a full account of this discussion). Additionally, two focal student applicants experienced challenges while developing their writing voice and identity. For instance, both of the students stated that they wanted to sound 'professional' and hoped their readers would pick up on this image they wanted to deliver. Apart from the issues that I have raised in this small-scale exploratory study, I will also discuss the potential inadequacy of genre theory and analysis in relation to PSs in the next section.

1.4 Statement of problem on genre theory and analysis in relation to the Personal Statement

As I have mentioned in Section 1.1.3, previous studies on applicants' PSs have primarily focused on the text itself and have identified rhetorical/generic moves and steps in such texts for different disciplines of study (Bekins et al., 2004; Ding, 2007; Samraj & Monk, 2008). Although the typical examples of rhetorical structures and linguistic features identified from the PSs are useful as they offer applicants a snapshot of what may be expected from a reading of their PSs, the findings and implications of these studies appear to suggest that there is a sense of being 'stability' and 'standardisation' within the genre. Specifically, the considerations of applicants as individual writers possessing their own voice and identity, and of academics as individuals with their own views and criteria for evaluating students' PSs, appear to have received less attention. Although the contemporary notion of genre has been viewed in terms of 'fluidity' and 'dynamics', it seems to me that the variations and implicit expectations of PSs are seldom explored by researchers. Here, I have argued that as students may approach their PSs differently and academics may possess varied views toward PSs, it would be more beneficial to explore students' and academics' assumptions of this type of text and how they have approached it.

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Also, I have found that Swales' definition of genre (1990) – “A class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constraints choice of content and style” (p. 58) – does not fit well with PSs. Firstly, the former part of Swales' definition (“the members of [a class of communicative events] share some set of communicative purposes”) appears to suggest that genre is meant to be practised by members of a group. However, it is commonly acknowledged that people who compose this type of text are individual applicants who will not belong to the same group or background. Rather, the PSs are often written by individuals from different backgrounds who are attempting to enter a targeted academic community. Secondly, although I have agreed that “the expert members of the parent discourse community” would “constitute the rationale for the genre”, the part where Swales indicates that “this rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse” seems somewhat limited by its standpoint that genres are not the property of individuals, but rather the property of experts from a discourse community (Swales, 1990); this promotes the idea that it is the ‘expert members’ who practice and determine the ‘schematic structure’ of the genre. Specifically, I acknowledge that the academics in a specific academic community, serving as gatekeepers to higher education, will “constitute the rationale for the genre” and hence influence the “choice of content and style” (ibid. p. 58). However, since members of the academics are not the individuals who have actually composed the PSs, it can be argued that the ‘schematic structure’ of PSs should not be seen to be ‘shaped’ (but may be ‘influenced’) by them; instead, it should be seen as formed by a group of students who have indeed written their PSs. From this perspective, Swales' definition appears to imply that genre is ‘uniform’ and ‘stable’. In fact, Bhatia, in his article, *Genres in Conflict*, highlights the fluidity and complexity of genre:

An understanding of a prior knowledge of conventions is considered essential for its identification, construction, interpretation, use and ultimate exploitation by members of specific professional communities to achieve socially recognised goals with some degree of pragmatic

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success. This may give a somewhat misleading impression that generic forms are always standardised and static. (Bhatia, 2000, p. 147)

Expanding on Bhatia's viewpoint, I would argue that rather than imposing the idea of genre to PSs that primarily focuses on their textual/linguistic features, it would be more beneficial to discuss the 'instability' or 'fluidity' of this type of text due to the fact that it is written by individual applicants and not by those experts belonging to a specific discourse community. In light of this perspective, it can be inferred that a student's PSs can be 'fluid' and 'unstable' in nature so that "it will not always be possible or indeed helpful to identify a clear staging or genetic structure in an actual text or interaction" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 72).

Furthermore, Fairclough (2003) argues that analysing generic structure holds value for those rigid, "strategic" and "purpose-driven" genres (p. 72). He offers an example of mundane market transactions to illustrate the need for an analysis of generic structure. The market transactions here, according to Fairclough, seem to be rather structured within a re-occurring order. In other words, these genres are more systematic and ritualised, and so identifying their generic structures may help people to more easily interact with them. Fairclough (2003) states, "the more ritualized an activity is, the more relevant such as analysis is" (p. 72). Since PSs are not fully constrained by such a ritualised context, my investigation argues that students' writing practices that are associated with PSs may be 'unstable' and 'varied', especially since students are not fully familiar with the conventions of a given academic discourse community and have not yet become members of that community. Even if students have shared some understanding of what are important criteria for the PSs, they may compose and present their information in different ways in terms of their language choice, voice, and identity as presented in these texts.

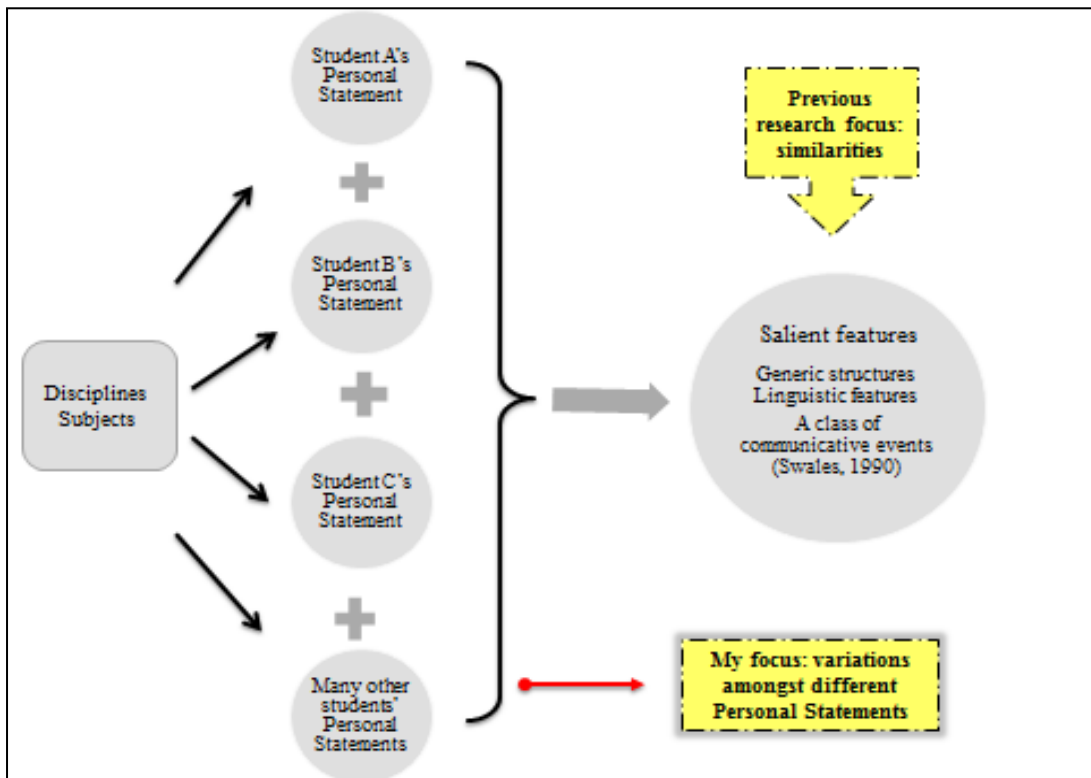
1.5 The focus of the main study

Based upon the discussions in earlier sections, my study offers a different focus from what has been done in the existing studies of the PS that I have reviewed and aims to examine students' writing practices that are associated with PSs, writer-reader perceptions of the PS, and understand PSs within wider institutional contexts.

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Specifically, my investigation of the PS is not simply modelled upon rhetorical structures and linguistic features. Figure 1.1 below illustrates the differences between the focus of previous studies on PSs that I have reviewed and the focus of my thesis (see Appendix 3 for the original size of this figure):

Figure 1.1 My research focus vs. Existing studies on PSs

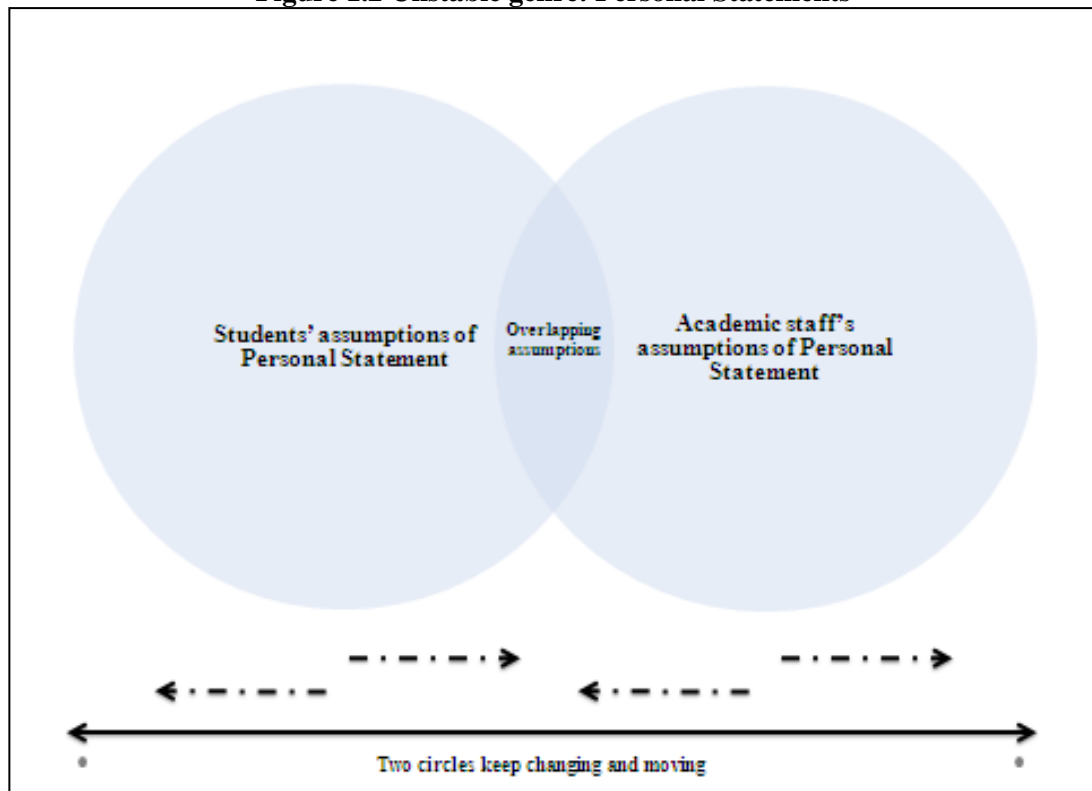


As shown in Figure 1.1 as well as the discussions in section 1.1.3, the existing research on students' PSs considers them to be an example of genre and conducts genre-based approaches to seek similarities (i.e. rhetorical structures) amongst students' PSs within specific disciplines/subjects and academic communities. Such an investigation pays less attention to the cultural and ideological factors that also need to be considered in relation to the PS. In comparison, my study emphasises the variations of students' PSs, which, I believe, enables me to move beyond thinking of genre as a typology of formalistic text features and to help me explore other writing issues rather than merely its rhetorical features. Such a research focus will also open up a discussion on how genre instructors could guide their students to write within the context of an 'unstable genre' when completing such documents.

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It is also acknowledged that once the PSs have been submitted, the students no longer possess any control (Brown, 2004, 2005; Paley, 1996); instead, the reader will then determine which students are selected for admission. This situation creates an “inherent imbalance of knowledge” between students and academics (Brown 2004, p. 243), in the sense that students often have limited knowledge regarding the unknown and often implicit criteria and judgements that are made on their PSs by the readers. The dynamics of power relations between students and academics is an important factor that is not always acknowledged in conceptions of genre, but the PSs provide a compelling case that deserves more attention. In acknowledging the interpretations of the PS that have been made by individual writers and individual readers, I would argue that PSs belong to an ‘unstable genre’, within which both students and academics can influence meanings and interpretations of the PSs; this forms an important empirical question that I will investigate in my research. Figure 1.2 below identifies the features of instability and fluidity in students’ PSs (*see* Appendix 4 for the original size of this figure):

Figure 1.2 Unstable genre: Personal Statements



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Since there are other criteria that remain implicit for students, it would be safe to say that perceptions of such criteria will vary from one student to another. Different perceptions may guide individual students to write in unique ways that will represent their ‘cases’. In this sense, students possess a certain freedom when it comes to texturing their PSs (Fairclough 2003, p. 22). Also, academics’ perceptions may also be varied from one to another. The issue of difference also highlights Chandler’s (2000) argument, that some genres are “looser and more open-ended in their conventions or more permeable in their boundaries than others” (p. 2).

1.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have shown here that PSs are often classified as a type of promotional and occluded genre. My review of the literature has shown that the majority of the studies on PSs have mainly worked with the notion of genre and approached it mainly from the text itself, aiming to identify the similarity of the textual features of this type of text. I have critically engaged with the ideas of genre analysis and theory in relation to PSs and have identified ‘research gaps’ in the traditional genre-based analysis on the PS; such an approach pays less attention to the fluidity and complexity of this type of text. In other words, many other features such as writer identity that students bring to the act of writing, write-reader assumptions of the PS and institutional ideology and epistemology that surround, and are embedded within, diverse writing and evaluation practices across the institutional context have received less attention.

My discussions on the challenges of composing PSs have revealed that many other issues that surround the PS are often implicit to applicants. My small-scale exploratory study of two graduate students’ PSs in this chapter has also suggested that the genre-based move-step analysis on the exploration of this type of text may not be enough to investigate other implicit writing issues and hence there is a need to draw on other theoretical and analytical frameworks and concepts to help understand the PS. Specifically, in my thesis, I am taking an academic literacy perspective (i.e. Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 2004) to help me understand the PS from ideological and epistemological perspectives. I will discuss this perspective as well as other

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analytical concepts that I draw on for the analysis of different data sources in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 – Conceptualising academic literacies: Analysing Personal Statements and their associated writing and evaluation processes

In Chapter 1, I explored the PS for admissions to higher education and identified some issues that surround this type of text, issues such as writer identity, audience expectations, writer-reader power relationships, and institutional practices. In order to reach a better understanding of the PS, my thesis explores this document through a socio-cultural, social practice lens in general, and an academic literacies perspective in particular, which allows me to fill in the ‘gaps’ of rhetorical move-step analysis on the PS.

Since the notion of academic literacies, which focuses on understanding issues of student academic writing and learning, has been developed within ‘New Literacy Studies (NLS)’ (Street, 1984, 1996; Gee, 2008; Barton, 2007), it is useful to briefly sketch the notion of literacy in NLS. Given the depth and breadth of the field, I have tried to articulate those ideas that have proved to be most useful for my study when I investigated students’ PSs rather than exhausting the ongoing theoretical discussions. Specifically, I begin by introducing the notion of literacy in literacy studies, drawing on the view of literacy as a social practice (Street, 1984). I also discuss the distinction between ‘literacy events’ and ‘literacy practices’ with reference to Street’s (2000) accounts as they provide useful lenses for handling the discussion and interpretation of issues of student writing at different abstract levels. In this chapter, I introduce the academic literacies perspective that I have chosen as the foundation for my theoretical and methodological framework, drawing on Lea and Street’s (1998, 2006) accounts on three models – ‘study skills’, ‘academic socialisation’ and ‘academic literacies’ – in relation to student writing in higher education. The academic literacies theoretical framing allows for an exploration into what people do and think when interact with the PS. I also discuss the notions of genre in academic literacies. As I am interested in how students position themselves in their PSs, with particular focus on issues of writer voice and identity in writing, I review the existing studies in relation to this aspect of the investigation.

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In this chapter, I also discuss details concerning my approaches to analysing written and spoken discourse as my thesis relies on the data sources of students' PSs and interviews with students and academics. Specifically, for analysing PS texts, I draw on Hyland's metadiscourse analysis to help investigate students' PSs as it provides a systematic exploration into the relations between student writers and academics through the mediation of the PSs. In my exploration of the interview data, I treat the interview as a kind of social action (Heritage, 2005) within which speakers may choose a particular way to represent themselves when they express their ideas. Specifically, I draw on Fairclough's (2003) analytical concept of 'identification' to contribute to the understanding of speakers' attitudes and positions towards their interpretations and assumptions in relation to the PS.

Here, it should be noted that the analytical concepts that I have drawn upon in my study are not necessarily housed within the broader academic literacies theoretical framework and the theorists themselves might not have expected their ideas to be used in this way. However, I have pointed out exactly how I have drawn on these concepts to help analyse different sources of data for my study, which will contribute to an understanding of the PS. I will exemplify how I have applied these analytical concepts to my data in Chapter 3.

2.1 Literacy/Academic literacies as a research perspective

The concept that literacies are best understood when investigated in the contexts within which they occur, has been applied to literacy studies by many socio-cultural literacy researchers (e.g., Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 2001). Street, a founder of NLS (1995), defined literacy as a social practice rather than a set of neutral or technical skills that can be transferred from one context to another. Such a view towards the study of literacy challenges the dominant approaches to literacy that considers the acquisition of cognitive skills and development (Street, 2003). Drawing on his work, Street (1984) draws attention to two models of literacy – 'autonomous' and 'ideological' – two of which take different views towards literacy. The autonomous model often conceptualises literacy as a technical skill that can be acquired through cognitive development (Street, 1994). In other words, the 'autonomous' model of literacy makes an assumption that "literacy in itself –

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autonomously – will have effects on other social and cognitive practices” (Street, 2003, p. 77). To some extent, this idea views literacy issues as being problematic as it starts with a deficit that people do not possess literacy but, if the people are empowered with literacy knowledge, they can enhance their cognitive skills and read and write better. Street (2003) has suggested that this model of literacy pays less attention to the cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin it.

In contrast, rather than viewing literacy as primarily a neutral skill, Street (1984) offers a more culturally-oriented view towards literacy practices, or what he terms the ‘ideological’ model of literacy. The ideological model of literacy regards literacies as social practices that recognise “the variety of cultural practices associated with reading and writing in different contexts” (Street, 1993, p. 7; *see also* Gee, 1996). In light of this perspective, literacy is more than simply acquiring technical and neutral skills and restrictively defined as an ability to read and write in a language. In other words, such literacy practices have their own meanings, which are rooted in a particular sociocultural context and embedded in “socially constructed epistemological principles” (Street, 2005, p. 12). The concept that literacy is a social practice informs both the theory and methodology of an academic literacies approach, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

2.1.1 Literacy events and literacy practices

A distinction between ‘literacy events’ and ‘literacy practice’ becomes useful when examining the variety of literacies across contexts (Street, 2003). Shirley Brice Heath has characterised a literacy event as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants’ interactions and their interpretative processes” (Heath, 1982, p. 93). Also, it is acknowledged that a literacy event may not only involve texts but also other resources in the attainment of a wide range of human practices. For this reason, texts can be regarded as one source of information in these literacy events. Street’s term, ‘literacy practices’, is a “combination of the actual ‘events of literacy’ and the cultural, social and political underpinnings that surround the event” (Rumsey, 2010, p. 137). Street (2003) states that the employment of the phrase, ‘literacy practice’, provides a means for looking into “social practices and conceptions of reading and writing” and such practices give

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meaning to individual literacy events (p. 78). In light of these points, the notion of practices encompasses the intentions and meanings of people's social action, which helps better understand and interpret particular ways of thinking about or doing things within a particular context.

Street (2000) argues that "you can photograph literacy events but you cannot photograph literacy practices" (p. 21). Specifically, the distinction between literacy events and literacy practices is that the events are phenomena or episodes that can be seen and observed while practices cannot be understood merely through observations because they are based upon a diversity of beliefs, values, and social and power relations. Street (2000) states that we may provide detailed descriptions of an observable literacy event but on its own it does not progress beyond a descriptive level because the event itself does not tell us how related meanings are to be constructed in particular cultural contexts. When working with these ideas, the distinction between 'literacy events' and 'literacy practices' becomes particularly useful for my exploration of students' PSs as it provides a means for looking into such documents on these abstract levels. Specifically, on the one hand, via the lens of literacy event, the PS itself can be seen as a product in a series of literacy events that occur during the application process for university admission. It can also be viewed as one of the sources of information when academics evaluate applications. On the other hand, via the lens of literacy practice, what cannot be understood from these observations are the beliefs and values of students and academics, and other issues that are associated with socio-cultural factors; these may give meaning to the ways in which students write their PSs and how members of academics evaluate these documents.

Based on this discussion, it can be said that texts are not simply "effects of linguistic structures and orders of discourse; they are also effects of other social structures, and of social practices in all their aspects" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 25). For instance, students, as social agents, have the freedom to compose their PSs. The ways in which they represent themselves through their PSs are different and these variations may be associated with certain ideological issues, such as the writers' ways of representing the world and their ways of conveying meanings through texts. It can

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then be suggested that the PS cannot be valued merely upon its content and textual features; rather, it should be seen as a social action that encompasses many social practices. These practices entail many social elements, such as people, discourse, social relations, and social interaction. For instance, in the PS writing processes, students may seek professional help from their advisors from relevant fields of study. The interactions between students and academics can be considered as to be a social practice which may then influence the processes of meaning-making in the PSs that are produced.

Literacy practices differ from one setting to another in terms of particular contexts, purposes, participants and other social aspects (Street, 2003). With respect to the genre and its application in intercultural contexts, Russell et al. (2009) have discussed writing and literacy practices in terms of institutional position of writing in various educational systems across countries. For instance, Russell et al. (2009) point out that different educational institutions may frame unique ideology and epistemology by illustrating some educational situations and phenomena existing in the UK and US. In the UK, the literacy (writing) practice focuses on student-instructor apprenticeship. That is, each student's writings will be supervised by his/her faculty members. This is different from "Writing across the Curriculum" (WAC) programmes which students are required to take to develop their writing skills in various disciplines in US-based educational institutions (Russell et al., 2009, p. 395).

2.1.2 An academic literacies approach

As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, my study adopts the academic literacies perspective as a framework for understanding the student PS and its associated writing and evaluation practices. As the concept of academic literacies has been developed from the area of NLS (Lea & Street, 1998), it shares views that "viewing literacy from a cultural and social practice approach (rather than in terms of educational judgements about good and bad writing) [in the way ideological model of literacy has suggested] and approaching meanings as contested can give us insights into the nature of academic literacy in particular" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158). Allied to the NLS, the academic literacies studies employ a social and cultural

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approach when investigating student academic writing, which challenges the dominant view that students cannot write, which is stated by many academics in higher education (Lea & Street, 1998). Specifically, academic literacies research on student writing considers the complexities of writing practices that involves issues of language and culture, power relations, identity, and institutional epistemology (*see* Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Ivanič, 1998). As a part of the study of language in use, academic literacies research also draws on a number of different fields, such as critical discourse analysis, applied linguistics and anthropology (Street, 1984, 2003; Baynham, 1995; Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Lillis & Scott, 2007). These perspectives aid an understanding of the complexity of academic writing produced by students.

According to Lillis and Scott's (2007) article on the issues of ideology and epistemology in academic literacies research, the notion of practice links language with people's actions: "practice signals that specific instances of language use – spoken and written texts – do not exist in isolation but are bound up with what people do – *practices* – in the material, social world" (p. 11). Thus, many research studies of academic literacies investigate the complexity of literacy practices rather than view literacy as simply a unitary reading and writing skill that can be transferred from one context to another, as the autonomous model of literacy would suggest. In other words, rather than simply judging student writing as being of either 'good' or 'poor' quality as the dominant 'deficit' model would suggest, Lea and Street (1998) state that it is crucial to fully investigate students' and faculty staff's understandings and expectations of the writing process itself, without making judgements beforehand about which practices turned out to be most effective. For instance, Lea and Street (1998) have examined academic writing by students in relation to issues of writer identity, power relations, and institutional practices; these emphasise various interpretations of the writing process and differences between the perspectives of students and academics as well as contribute towards an institutional understanding of academic literacy practices in higher education.

Lea and Street (1998) have found that students are very often aware of a shift between various writing assignments and discipline, and have found it difficult to understand what constitutes appropriate writing for a particular subject or a

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particular tutor. That is, the writing practices are not merely about technical skills that can be considered as transferrable and generic across disciplines. Rather, the assumptions about “what constitutes valid knowledge within a particular context, and the relationships of authority that exist around the communication of these assumptions” have affected the process of meaning-making given to students’ writing (ibid. p. 170), and often these assumptions remain implicit to student writers. My study follows this lead, investigating student writing from ideological and epistemological perspectives rather than simply providing an analysis of the technical linguistic skills involved.

Research on academic literacies tends to be qualitative in nature, and adopts an ethnographic style of approach when investigating student writing practices and taking into account the various social and cultural perspectives. This methodology enables researchers to examine the assumptions of faculty members as well as students, in terms of the writing process, and to identify the gaps between their perceptions (Lea & Street, 1997; Cohen, 1993; Lea, 1994; Street, 1995). Research within this field draws on data from multiple textual sources and frames different levels of analysis, including a focus on student writing and institutional practices. This approach does take into account textual analysis as Lea and Street (1998) acknowledge that the textual material is an “equally important source of data which we needed to consider in relation to the interview data” (p. 160). In light of this point, I also introduce metadiscourse analysis, drawing on Hyland’s work to investigate student PS texts systematically, as will be outlined in section 2.3. in this chapter.

2.1.3 The role of genre in academic literacies

As my study focuses on the PS as a type of genre, it is important to discuss the role of genre and my stance towards conceptualising the PS within the theoretical framing of academic literacies that I have chosen for my study. According to Russell et al. (2009), issues of genre have been mapped out in relation to the three models/perspectives that help to conceptualise student academic writing in higher education: ‘study skills’, ‘academic socialisation’, and ‘academic literacies’. They also stated that each of these perspectives is associated with “a different orientation to the notion of genre” (Russell et al. 2009, p. 405). Lea and Street (2006) state that

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these perspectives do not contradict one another but rather, they overlap to some extent.

With respect to the ‘study skills’ perspective, genre has been mainly conceptualised referring to surface linguistic features and forms of genre, and it presumes that it can help students acquire instrumental/cognitive skills that enable learners to transfer their knowledge from one academic setting to another (Lea & Street, 2006). This perspective pays little attention to any context where language is used. Lea and Street (1998) have expanded the study skill perspective to a wider social perspective, as they use the term ‘academic socialisation’ perspective.

The ‘academic socialisation’ perspective takes account of study skills but encompasses them by being concerned with students’ acculturation into a new ‘culture’ in a specific academic community. The notion of genre in relation to the perspective of academic socialisation has been conceptualised in relation to different disciplines and their norms of communication (Russell et al., 2009). The academic socialisation also indicates that students will be able to produce texts effectively by learning and then acquiring rules of a particular genre or academic discourse. Specifically, different disciplines have different ways of constructing knowledge, by adopting different genres and discourses (Bazerman, 1988; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). However, according to Lea and Street (1998), the academic socialisation may not take into account issues of “institutional practices, including processes of change and the exercise of power” (p. 159). The academic socialisation perspective presumes that genres and academic discourses across different disciplines are stable and once students have gained these disciplinary norms, they are able to get access to the whole institution (ibid.).

The perspective ‘academic literacies’ incorporates the study skills and academic socialisation models to a more encompassing understanding of student writing with the considerations of issues of identities, power relations, and institutional ideology and epistemology in a particular academic community. The academic literacies perspective views literacy as a complex and dynamic social practice. It focuses not only on genre knowledge in subject or discipline-based discourses but also on the

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relationship between epistemology and institutional requirements; examples might include ‘gaps’ between students’ and academics’ expectations of what should be included in writing assignments (Lea & Street, 1998; Stierer, 1997; Ivanič, 1998). This perspective also suggests that genre plays a complex and dynamic role in relation to the literacy practices that are specific to a discourse.

Given the conceptions of the role of genre in academic literacies, the notion of genre carries various discursual and epistemological features, which are socially constructed (Lea & Street, 2006). In my study, I position the role of genre in the third perspective (‘academic literacies’) of student writing with a view of genre as a social practice. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, research focusing on other traditions of research and practice in the field of student writing such as ESP/EAP differs from academic literacies research. These approaches suggest that, instead, students need to be provided with technical skills, as the study skills perspective would suggest, to equip them to successfully participate in the target academic community, rather than recognising a variety of ways of writing, including building upon their own prior skills and knowledge as the academic literacies approach advocates.

Methodologically, whilst taking a different approach to the studies on ESP/EAP and other genre-related fields of study, the academic literacies research does not refer to texts as instances of genre in the way that ESP/EAP scholars have done. Specifically, the role of genre in ESP/EAP studies is mainly associated with Lea and Street’s (1998; 2006) accounts concerning the perspective of study skills and academic socialisation of student writing, conceptualising genre in relation to a set of technical skills and disciplinary norms and knowledge of a particular academic discourse. However, the role of genre in academic literacies research has been considered as a social practice that concerns “meaning making, identity, power and authority” and emphasises the “institutional nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context” (Lea & Street, 2006, pp. 227-228).

2.2 Writer identity in writing

This section explores the issue of writer identity in academic writing as this issue is one of the main focuses in my study and it is considered as being an important aspect in academic literacies research. The academic writing produced by students can be seen as a form of self-representation and self-identification (Ivanič & Camps, 2001). I also review the issue of ‘voice’ in the literature as it is also relevant in relation to student writing. In my study, I will be mainly using the notion of ‘identity’ to explore how students position themselves in their PSs; however, where appropriate, I will draw on the aspect of ‘voice’ in my discussion.

In recent years, the notions of writer identity and self-representation in writing have received great attention in the field of applied linguistics (Hyland, 2002, Stapleton, 2002; Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Viete & Le Ha, 2007; Ivanič, 1998, 2005). One of the most widely adopted notions of ‘identity’ is based on Ivanič’s (1998) discussion in which she summarised the aspects of writer identity in terms of four ‘selves’ – ‘autobiographical self’, ‘discoursal self’, ‘self as author’, and ‘possibilities for self-hood in the socio-cultural and institutional context’.

According to Ivanič (1998), the *first* aspect of identity, the ‘autobiographical self’, is concerned with the identity that writers use to respond to a particular text. It is associated with “a writer’s sense of their roots, of where they come from, and that this identity they bring with them to writing is itself socially constructed and constantly changing as a consequence of their developing life-history” (p. 24). Individuals will bring this aspect of identity to the act of writing, which is based on their past social experiences and these experiences will continue to develop the individual and influence the ways in which they write. Ivanič has also stated that “who we are affects how we write” (p. 181). For instance, if a student wants to apply for a graduate programme concerned with the subject of policy, when composing the PSs for application, he/she would draw on his/her past working experience, such as being a policymaker or doing something that is related to it. In this sense, his/her past life history may position him/her as a policymaker and this may then influence the way he/she writes.

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The *second* aspect of identity is known as the ‘discoursal self’, which focuses on how the “discourse characteristics of a text” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 25) influences a writer’s way of conveying himself/herself, either consciously or unconsciously. For Ivanič, the ‘discoursal self’ is “constructed through the discourse characteristics of a text, which relate to values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they were written” (p. 25). In other words, the characteristics of particular pieces of writing may shape the writers’ voices in terms of the way they wish to sound. For instance, individuals would use academic forms of writing for essays and favour less formal styles when writing letters to friends. The characteristics of these two types of writing, to some extent, shape (*or constrain*) the way in which people write.

The *third* aspect of identity, known as ‘self as author’, is concerned with the extent to which writers claim “authority as the source of the content of the text, and in how far they establish an authorial presence in their writing” (p. 26; *see also* Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Tang & John, 1999 – ‘authorial identity’). This aspect of identity emphasises the writer’s voice and the degree to which they view themselves as authors. Research on this aspect focuses on how writers establish their authority in writing. To take an example offered by Ivanič (1998), some writers may attribute their ideas to other authorities while hiding their own position or real self; on the other hand, others may possess a strong voice and confirm their authorial stance. This aspect of identity, according to Ivanič, is different from the aspects of ‘autobiographical self’ and ‘discoursal self’. However, the ‘self as author’ may be a ‘product’ of a writer’s ‘autobiographical self’, which is a reference to the writer’s life experiences and how such experiences may or may not have developed in them a strong sense of self and the confidence to write with authority (*ibid.*). The ‘self as author’ is also an aspect of ‘discoursal self’. For instance, one of the features of the ‘discoursal self’ is the writer’s authoritativeness (the ways he/she wants to sound), which can be associated with the ‘self as author’ (*ibid.*).

The *fourth* aspect of identity, known as ‘possibilities for self-hood’, is concerned with “prototypical possibilities for self-hood that are available to writers in the social context of writing: ‘social’ identities in the sense that they do not just belong to particular individuals” (p. 27). Ivanič adopts the term ‘possibilities for self-hood’

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because it suggests a multi-faceted social identity. Specifically, it is possible to see that the academic context provides many disciplinary identities, gender identity, and other social identities within a particular socio-cultural context (Ivanič, 1998). All of these socially available resources offer several (overlapping) options for the “self-representation” and construction of one’s identity (Ivanič, 1998, p. 281). One may adopt several identities simultaneously by drawing on numerous possibilities for their selfhood in their writing. Research on this aspect focuses on an exploration of the ‘possibilities for self-hood’ in conjunction with power relations, norms, and beliefs shaped within a particular socio-cultural and institutional context. The four aspects of identity that are proposed by Ivanič (1998) are interrelated in a number of ways. This interrelatedness aids an understanding of how a writer represents and positions himself/herself in the writing process.

Here, it should be noted that amongst the four aspects of writer identity, I will focus on the first three in my study as they appear to be the most relevant to the data I have collected. In other words, I will not draw on the aspect of ‘possibilities of self-hood’ as it seems to me the context, based on the Ivanič’s account, relates to a specific institutional context in which students are studying and considered members of that community. However, in my study, the students have not yet gained entry into their target academic community. From this viewpoint, the aspect of ‘possibilities for self-hood’ may not be fully applied to my study.

In her seminal work, *Writing and Identity: the Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing*, Ivanič (1998) has conducted an ethnographic investigation on L1 mature students in the UK, who have returned to university after an absence of several years from the academic community. She investigates students’ writing experiences by adopting a ‘life history’ approach, focusing on how they represent themselves in their writing drawing on their previous experiences beyond university settings. Her studies reveal that “multiple and conflicting identity is hard to ignore” (ibid. p. 6). Students might face problems like ‘accommodation’, ‘opposition’, and ‘resistance’, while composing their writing in a new academic discourse community (Chase, 1988; *see also* Hirvela & Belcher, 2001). Reflecting on Chase’s idea, Ivanič (1998) points out that there is a limited view of these approaches by which they

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separate the problems students might encounter in an academic discourse. Ivanič (1998) argues that student writing in an academic discourse community is no longer just “a question of accommodating to or resisting academic discourse as a whole. Rather, writers align themselves with one or more of the discursal possibilities for self-hood which are available within the academic community” (p. 92). Ivanič (1998) indicates that the notion of ‘resistance’ may also incorporate the idea of ‘accommodation’ in student writing. In such a context, the issues of ‘accommodation’, ‘opposition’, and ‘resistance’ to student writing in an academic discourse community can be aligned with one another, rather than existing as separate and independent of each other (Ivanič, 1998). Shen (1989) also supports this view as he illustrates his own shift in identity from writing in Chinese to writing in English. He states how writing in a language which is not his native language has involved a process of learning and in such a situation one may adopt and create a new identity and then balance it with his/her existing one. Shen has commented that the shifts in his identity have made him “aware [that] the process of redefinition of these different identities is a mode of learning that has helped [him] in [his] efforts to write in English” (p. 459).

In addition to the discussion on identity, another notion that is relevant to student identity in writing is ‘voice’. Ivanič and Camps (2001) have stated that ‘voice’ does not only exist in speech but it is also embedded in writing, even if written work does not often contain phonetic and prosodic elements. Many researchers who are interested in studying student voices in academic writing tend to use metaphors to illustrate such a concept. Bowden (1999) defines voice as “a metaphor [which] has to do with feeling-hearing-sensing a person behind the written words, even if that person is just a persona created for a particular text or a certain reading” (pp. 97-98). This view echoes Ivanič and Camps’ (2001) argument, that voice is “self-representation” and it can be seen in not only writing, but in all “human activity” (p. 4). Their ideas shift from traditional focus on voice, as relating each individual to other social-cultural factors (Fairclough, 1992; Ivanič, 1998). Aligning himself with this view, Matsuda (2001) examines a recent discussion on voice which “emphasise[s] its strong association with the ideology of individualism” (p. 35). He argues that “voice is not necessarily tied to the ideology of individualism” (ibid. p.

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36; *see also* Prior, 2001, Bakhtin, 1986; Wertsch, 2001; Ivanič, 1998); instead, the writer may incorporate socially available sources to represent himself/herself in a particular way, in order to satisfy the requirements of different occasions and different audiences. For instance, in his article, *Voice in Japanese written discourse: Implications for second language writing*, Matsuda (2001) investigates Japanese written discourse and refers to the personal Japanese online diary of a female Japanese author. He identifies ‘discursive features’ that are a part of the Japanese language. The findings reveal that the ‘voice’ of the Japanese author changed according to different social factors, such as ‘politeness’ and her multiple social identities as a wife and an author. Matsuda demonstrates how individual voice is constructed by the author through the use of specific ‘discursive features’ that are available within the Japanese language.

When students compose their writing, they may seek professional help from other people or search for additional information on websites. They may utilise these types of sources to help them compose their PSs. In light of this point, it is not hard to imagine that there may be other voices coming into the text during the process of composing it and these voices may (*or may not*) reflect their real self. For instance, Matsuda (2001) reflects upon his experiences of writing in English, as an international undergraduate student studying in the US. He recalls how he came to realise that finding one’s own voice is not the “process of discovering the true self that was within [one’s self]; it was the process of negotiating [one’s] socially and discursively constructed identity with the expectation of the reader as [one] perceived it” (p. 39). Hirvela and Belcher (2001) also claim that multiple voices help students to acknowledge the voice they already own, and also offer them alternative ones, which they can adopt and add to their rhetorical repertoire. Given the fluid nature of voice, Cummins (1994) refers to ‘voicing’ as a verb form in which he claims that “voicing in writing is a process of continually creating, changing, and understanding the internal and external identities that cast us as writers, within the confines of language, discourse, and culture” (p. 49). That is, the notion of voice in academic writing is a continuous process rather than a fixed product. In light of its ever-changing nature, Ivanič (1998) has pointed out that it is difficult to trace the original ‘voices’ of an individual writer. Specifically, these ‘voices’ in texts become

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“subliminal” as writers adopt them for their own purposes (Ivanič, 1998, p. 213). This standpoint can be associated with Bakhtin’s theory of language (1981, 1986) in which he argues that the use of language and the way in which people view the world via language relates to the voices of others. Bakhtin’s notion of voice states that words lose “the tones and ethos of individual utterances” as language/words are manipulated by different people and become a resource that can be used for different purposes (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 88). Bakhtin further states:

...language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293-294)

Similar to the “multiple and conflicting identity” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 6) that comes into existence when students compose their writing in a new academic discourse community, certain tensions may arise when students experience difficulty in writing and attempt to find an appropriate voice to meet the needs of a particular academic community. For instance, Viete and Le Ha (2007) indicate that literacy practices in western-based universities value “democracy and individualism” (i.e. ‘to be yourself’ in writing); however, they “often deny the individual’s right to write based on other norms” (p. 40). In light of this point, it can be argued that such a value embedded within Western culture may not be fully applied to student writing when it comes to the point where students’ writings are evaluated against western norms (Shen, 1989, p. 38). Similarly, Hirvela and Belcher (2001), arguing from a pedagogical perspective, claim that while helping students to develop an identity and voice in their writing has been considered important, the privileged focus remains on “western or a romantic or individualistic notion of voice in classroom situations where many students do not share such a background” (p. 83).

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Another factor that can influence student voice and identity in student writing is the relationship between the readers and writers (Ivanič, 1998; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Atkinson, 2001). This aspect is extremely valuable to my study because the “inherent imbalance of knowledge” (Brown, 2004, p. 243) creates an invisible tension between students and academics; such a tension may also influence how students position themselves and how their voice and identity vary when they consider their readers’ expectations (Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Street, 1996; Haswell & Haswell, 1995). Ramanathan and Kaplan (1996) argue that writers are able to write their texts with a strong voice when they have a clear idea about who their potential audiences will be (*see also* Bazerman, 1988; Swales, 1990; Bizzell, 1992). However, many studies have revealed that students experience difficulties in finding out this information, and also what expectations they should meet since they are not active participants in the target discourse community (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). Accordingly, a lack of awareness and familiarity with the writing features that are favoured by the target academic discourse community means students may only guess what expectations the readers will have of them.

2.3 Language as social interaction: my approaches to discourse analysis

In line with the academic literacies perspective, my study involves collecting students’ PS texts, and conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews with both students and academics to explore their assumptions and interpretations about the PS. I also obtain students’ comments on their own PSs and academics’ feedback on these texts. This section outlines my approaches to discourse analysis in relation to the different data sources in my study. I will first provide a brief description regarding the notion of discourse, where I will also discuss my own position on the use of discourse analysis in my study as well as for the study of language.

The term ‘discourse’ has been used in a variety of ways by scholars from varied academic traditions, such as linguistics, sociology, and anthropology (Paltridge, 2006; Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton, 2003). My approaches to the study of language data align with a functionalist paradigm which views discourse as an actual instance of language in use (Johnstone, 2002). Such a view contrasts with the ideas

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that are proposed by a structuralist paradigm that treats discourse as ‘sentences’ (Schiffrin, 1994). Leech (1983) also suggests that a structuralist perspective would view “language as an autonomous system, whereas functionalists study it in relation to its social function” (p. 46). In other words, a structuralist paradigm is based on the general premise that the internal organisation of language exists and that it cannot be impinged by the external functions of a language (Schiffrin, 1994). Whilst recognising a more functionalist view of language, I have adopted the accounts given by Brown and Yule (1983, p. 1) to the study of language:

The analysis of discourse, is necessarily, the analysis of language in use. As such, it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs.

In other words, such a view rests on the basic principle that language cannot be understood without taking into account the contexts in which it occurs and is used. Such a view is expanded upon by some critical language academics, such as Fairclough (2003), whose approach to discourse analysis is based upon the assumption that “language is an irreducible part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life” (p. 2). He has also suggested many linguistic devices/analytical concepts of ‘textually oriented discourse analysis’ that can be adopted to help operate the investigation of texts. Although Fairclough makes a distinction from his term ‘textually oriented discourse analysis’ to other approaches to discourse analysis which focus on a more social theoretical orientation, he argues that these two orientations are not mutually exclusive; rather, “an analysis of discourse [...] is both linguistic and social in its orientation” (cited in Paltridge, 2006, p. 8). Specifically, Fairclough’s approach to discourse analysis has been trying to bridge the division between linguistic analysis of texts and other elements of social issues. Paltridge (2006) also states that Fairclough and others who have shared this similar view do not consider “these two perspectives to be incompatible with each other, arguing that the instances of language in use that are studied under a textually oriented view of discourse are still socially situated and need to be interpreted in terms of their social meanings and functions” (p. 8).

2.3.1 Analysing texts

Metadiscourse devices

My approach to text analysis emphasises the exploration of both surface linguistic features and the meaning which goes beyond the text itself in relation to ‘practices’. Specifically, the term ‘surface linguistic features’ in my study means lexical and grammatical choices used in the language expression of students’ PS texts. In terms of communication in academic texts, Hyland’s (2005) metadiscourse analysis has been widely considered to be particularly useful when investigating the writer-reader assumption about a particular text because this approach is based on a view of “writing as social engagement” (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 156). On this view there is a correspondence between writers’ meanings and their language expressions, although, as will be discussed in Chapter 3, this correspondence, however strong or tenuous, has to be established by careful analysis (*see* Chapter 3: section 3.6 for a discussion on the combination of linguistic analytical means and a social practice approach). As Hyland’s metadiscourse offers a range of linguistic indices, as will be discussed below, it provides a useful entry point and systematic way of approaching the text and examining how linguistic devices function within it and how they help realise the writer’s intended meaning.

In the following paragraphs, I introduce Hyland’s interpersonal model of metadiscourse to help investigate the way in which “writers weave into their texts expression of their interests and stances to the content and the reader, their awareness of addressee and context of writing, and assumptions about the reader” (Price, 2008, p.07.1). Table 2.1 below shows the analytical categories of interpersonal metadiscourse proposed by Hyland (2005: 49):

Table 2.1 An interpersonal model of metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005: 49)

Category	Function	Examples
<i>Interactive</i>	<i>Help to guide the reader through the text</i>	<i>Resources</i>
Transitions	express relations between main clauses	in addition; but; thus; and
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	finally; to conclude; my purpose is
Endophoric markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	noted above; see figure; in section 2
Evidentials	refer to information from other texts	according to X; Z states
Code glosses	elaborate propositional meaning	namely; e.g.; such as; in other words
<i>Interactional</i>	<i>Involve the reader in the text</i>	<i>Resources</i>
Hedges	withhold commitment and open dialogue	might; perhaps; possible; about
Boosters	emphasise certainty and close dialogue	in fact; definitely; it is clear that
Attitude markers	expresses writers' attitude to proposition	unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly
Self-mentions	explicit reference to author(s)	I; we; me; our
Engagement markers	explicitly build relationship with reader	consider; note; you can see that

Hyland's metadiscourse model, drawing on several earlier models (cf. Vande Kopple, 1985; Thompson, 2001b), distinguishes between 'interactive' and 'interactional' resources for metadiscourse. 'Interactive' resources are "a consequence of the writer's assessment of the reader's assumed comprehension capacities, understandings of related texts, and need for interpretive guideline, as well as the relationship between the writer and reader" (Hyland, 2005, p. 50). Specifically, 'interactive' resources are concerned with the ways in which writers manage the information flow in text to guide readers to their preferred interpretations. The features of this dimension include: 'transitions', 'frame markers', 'endophoric markers', 'evidentials', and 'code glosses' (Hyland, 2005). The 'interactional' resources concern "the writer's efforts to control the level of personality in a text and establish a suitable relationship to his or her data, arguments, and audience, marking the degree of intimacy, the expression of attitude, the communication of commitments, and the extent of reader involvement" (Hyland, 2004, p. 139). The features of this dimension include: 'hedges', 'boosters', 'attitude markers', 'self-mentions', and 'engagement markers' (Hyland, 2005). The functions of each metadiscoursal resource are discussed in detail as follows:

Interactive metadiscoursal resources

- *Transition markers* are primarily used to help the readers interpret the logical relationships between propositions. These resources are mainly “conjunctions” and “adverbial phrases” (ibid. p. 50).

Examples: ‘in contrast’, ‘furthermore’, ‘however’, etc.

- *Frame markers* are resources that “signal text boundaries or elements of schematic text structure” (ibid. p. 51). In other words, these resources are used “to sequence, to label text stages, to announce discourse goals, and to indicate topic shifts” (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 168).

Examples: ‘first’, ‘to summarise’, ‘my purpose here is to’, ‘let us return to’, etc.

- *Endophoric markers* are expressions that refer to information in other parts of the text. These resources “make additional ideational material salient” and provide “supporting arguments” and thus help guide the reader towards “a preferred interpretation” (ibid. p. 51).

Examples: ‘see Figure 2’, ‘as noted above’, ‘in this chapter’, etc.

- *Evidentials* are “metalinguistic representations of an idea from another source” to “guide the reader’s interpretation and establish an authorial command of the subject” (ibid. p. 51).

Examples: ‘according to X’, ‘Y states’, etc.

- *Code glosses* “supply additional information, by rephrasing, explaining or elaborating what has been said, to ensure the reader is able to recover the writer’s intended meaning” (ibid. p. 52). In other words, these resources help the reader comprehend the ideational material. They also reflect “the writer’s predictions about the reader’s knowledge-base” (ibid. p. 52). More specifically, the writer’s assumptions about the reader’s cognitive environment may influence the extent to which the information is provided by the writer (ibid. p. 50).

Examples: ‘for example’, ‘in other words’, ‘that is’, etc.

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Interactional metadiscoursal resources

- *Hedges* are used under the cases in which the writer withholds full commitment to a proposition (Hyland, 2005). They serve as indicators of “the writer’s decision to recognise alternative voices, viewpoints”, and possibilities (ibid. p. 52). The use of this type of resource emphasises “the subjectivity of a position by allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact and therefore open that position to negotiation” with the reader (ibid. p. 52).

Examples: ‘might’, ‘perhaps’, ‘seems’, etc.

- *Boosters* allow the writer to “close down alternatives” and conflicting arguments by expressing certainty and emphasising the force of propositions (ibid. p. 52).

Examples: ‘in fact’, ‘definitely’, ‘it is clear that’, etc.

- *Attitude markers* indicate the writer’s attitude towards the propositional content. These resources convey ‘surprise’, ‘agreement’, ‘importance’, ‘obligation’, ‘frustration’ and other attitude expressions from the writer’s opinion or assessment of a proposition (ibid. p. 53).

Examples: ‘agree’, ‘prefer’, ‘fortunately’, ‘remarkable’, etc.

- *Self-mention* refers to “the degree of explicit author presence in the text measured by the frequency of first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives” (ibid. p. 53).

Examples: ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’.

- *Engagement markers* refer to explicitly addressing readers, “either to focus their attention or [to] include them as discourse participants” (ibid. p. 53).

Examples: ‘you’, ‘your’, ‘you may notice’, imperatives such as ‘see’, ‘consider’, etc.

2.3.2 Analysing interviews

My approach to the interview analysis is inspired by ‘constructionism’, which views interview dialogue as a form of ‘social action’ (Baker, 1997; Baker & Johnson, 1998). It is concerned with “how interview responses are produced in the interaction

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between interviewer and respondent, without losing sight of the meanings produced or the circumstances that condition the meaning-making process” (Silverman, 2006, p. 131). Although the constructionist perspective for analysing an interview allows for a focus on the analysis of ‘how’ people manage talk and ‘how’ participants get to say something, it may somehow overshadow ‘what’ has been actually said (cf. ‘criticisms of constructionism’ in Silverman, 2006, p. 131). In response to this critique, some constructionists claim that it is possible to approach the interview data by joining both “form (how) and content (what)” (ibid. p. 131; *see also* Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). In line with this argument, I approach my interview data with a primary focus on the propositional meaning in my participants’ accounts (‘content’). I also look into how my participants have expressed their thoughts during the interviews (‘form’) to strengthen my analysis. To achieve this aim, I adopt the approach of a ‘thematic analysis’ (Burnard, 1991; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and draw upon Fairclough’s (2003) notion of ‘identification’ for the analysis of my interview data.

Thematic analysis

I choose the approach of the ‘thematic analysis’ for the purpose of analysing what my participants have said in the interviews. This approach has been adapted from Glaser and Strauss’ ‘grounded theory approach’ and developed from ‘content analysis’ (Berg, 1989). ‘Thematic analysis’ shares many of the analytical features of ‘content analysis’ (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). For instance, both forms allow the researcher to identify themes and to establish emergent categories (Ritchie et al., 2003). However, unlike ‘content analysis’⁴, ‘thematic analysis’ not only provides “the systematic element characteristic of content analysis, but also permits the researcher to combine analysis of the frequency of codes with analysis of their meaning in context”, and this addresses the limitation of ‘content analysis’ (Joffe & Yardley, 2004, p. 57). This method enables to note patterns in the data and to produce a

⁴ “The content analytic method is appealing because it offers a model for systematic qualitative analysis with clear procedures for checking the quality of the analysis conducted. However, the results that are generated have been judged as ‘trite’ (Silverman, 1993) when they rely exclusively on frequency outcomes. Researchers employing this method are also sometimes accused of removing meaning from its context” (Joffe & Yardley, 2004, p. 57).

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detailed and systematic coding category. The detailed analytic procedures will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The notion of ‘identification’

In order to investigate my participants’ attitudes or positioning towards the topics they have talked about in the interview, I draw on Fairclough’s (2003) notion of ‘identification’ which emphasises “the process of identifying, how people identify themselves and are identified by others” through interactions (p. 159). Here it should be noted that Fairclough (2003) differentiates ‘identification’ from ‘identities’. He states that the process of ‘identification’ helps to tackle the complexity of making a distinction between “personal and social aspects of identity, social identity and personality” (p. 160). In other words, it is difficult to distinguish between these two aspects of identity and hence the term ‘identification’, stemming from the verb, ‘identify’, better represents the complex and dynamic nature/process of how people represent themselves in relation to their positioning in a particular context and to their awareness of being seen by others (ibid.).

Specifically, speakers’ attitudes towards propositions (e.g., degree of certainty) may “index a particular social relationship or attribute – such as powerlessness – stancetaking inevitably has to do with both epistemic and interactional aspects of perspective-taking in discourse” (Johnstone, 2009, p. 4). Such speakers’ attitudes may be signaled by the ‘recurring’ (*or* repeated) linguistic patterns in their utterances, and linguistic forms such as ‘modal verbs’ (Fairclough, 2003). For instance, members of academics who oversee admissions for student applications may avoid committing themselves to making firm statements concerning their views of the application documents. This may be due to the staff’s self-awareness of being a part of the admissions committee and their consideration of the responsibility for what they said. In light of this point, less strong degree of ‘modal verbs’, such as ‘might’, may be found in their views of the applications.

In my study, I specifically draw upon the notion of ‘modality’ (including ‘the use of subjectively marked modalities’) and ‘the use of personal pronouns’ to assist the understanding of speakers’ attitudes towards propositions. The notion of ‘modality’

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is concerned with “what authors *commit* themselves to, with respect to what is true and what is necessary” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 164). Modality is crucial in the sense that it constructs identities where “[a writer/speaker commits him/herself] to a significant part of what he/she is – so modality choices in texts can be seen as part of the process of texturing self-identity” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 166). Similarly, Halliday (1985) has stated that “modality means the speaker’s judgment of the probabilities, or the obligations, involved in what he is saying” (p. 75). Fairclough (2003) has linked ‘modality’ to four ‘speech functions’ in which ‘modality’ can be viewed as being what people commit themselves to when they make ‘Statements’, ask ‘Questions’, make ‘Demands’ or ‘Offers’ (p. 165). Two main types of modality are distinguished: ‘epistemic modality’ and ‘deontic modality’ in which the former is associated with ‘knowledge exchange’ whereas the latter is concerned with ‘activity exchange’ (ibid. p. 167). Both types of modality are linked to different types of ‘speech functions’ (ibid. pp. 167-168):

Knowledge exchange (‘epistemic modality’)

Statement: ‘author’s commitment to truth’

Assert: The window is open.

Modalise: The window may be open.

Deny: The window is not open.

Questions: author elicits other’s commitment to truth

Non-modalised positive: Is the window open?

Modalised: Could the window be open?

Non-modalised negative: Isn’t the window open?

Activity exchange (‘deontic modality’)

Demand: ‘author’s commitment to obligation/necessity

Prescribe: Open the window!

Modalise: You should open the window.

Proscribe: Don’t open the window!

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Offer: author's commitment to act

Undertaking: I'll open the window.

Modalised: I may open the window.

Refusal: I won't open the window.

'Epistemic modality' deals with the degree of certainty with and commitment to truth and the reliability of the sources of knowledge supporting one's claims (Chafe & Nichols, 1986). This type of modality is often realised through 'tense', 'hedges', and 'modal auxiliary verbs' (e.g., can, cannot, may, could, will). For example, if a student writes, 'my friend will come today', this sentence reveals his/her strong commitment to the statement because a modal verb has been used ('will'). This would sound different if other modal verbs, such as 'might', 'may', and 'could', were used in his/her statement; the statement would then become more tentative.

'Deontic modality' is concerned with the author's commitment to obligation and necessity, and acts. It is also often realised through 'modal auxiliary verbs' (e.g., can, must, will, should, nay), 'modal adjectives' (e.g., possible) and 'modal adverbs' (e.g., probably, definitely). For example, in the sentence, "*teaching has become the strongest element in my life and I cannot see myself involved in anything else*", the use of strong modality 'I cannot see myself involved' shows the writer's strong commitment to teaching in her life. Here, it should be noted that this discussion is not exclusive. In other words, the concept of modality is a rather "complex aspect of meaning" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 168). For instance, 'Demands' can be realised as 'question-requests' as "clauses that are Interrogative in their Grammatical Mood (e.g. 'Will you open the window?') and have the form of modalised Questions" (ibid.). Also, there are 'modal adverbials' ('definitely', 'certainly', 'obviously', etc.) and other markers of modalisation (e.g., 'seem', 'appear', 'in fact') that reveal different levels of author commitment (ibid. pp. 170-171). These 'model verbs' suggest different degrees of speaker/writer authority or certainty.

Apart from the 'verb tense' and 'modal auxiliary verbs', the degree of commitment a writer makes and the way in which that writer writes also relies on the intersection between 'modality' and other 'categories in clauses' (Fairclough, 2003). For

instance, there are differences between ‘subjectively marked modalities’ (e.g., ‘I think pursuing knowledge is important’) and ‘modalities that are not subjectively marked’ (e.g., ‘pursuing knowledge is important’). The ‘subjectively marked modalities’ contain ‘personal pronouns’ such as *I*, *we*, *you*, which, in English, have ‘relational values’⁵ (Fairclough, 2001. p. 106). According to Fairclough (2003), the use of ‘pronouns’ provides a sense of ‘individuality’ (e.g., ‘I’) and ‘collectivity’ (e.g., ‘we’). The use of first person pronoun ‘I’ may be the most visible way of revealing speaker/writer’s authorial identity (Hyland, 2005). This idea appears to be associated with Ivanič’s idea of ‘self as author’ that is an aspect of identity and is concerned with the extent to which writers claim “authority as the source of the content of the text, and in how far they establish an authorial presence in their writing” (p. 26; *see also* Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Ivanič & Camps, 2001; Tang & John, 1999). As is evident from the above examples, the sentence ‘I think pursuing knowledge is important’ starts with ‘I’, which makes this statement explicitly attributable to the person who writes it whereas the latter sentence ‘pursuing knowledge is important’ is a ‘third-person’ statement delivered in a comparatively less assertive tone. In other words, with the absence of personal pronouns or phrases that identify the speaker, it is less clear to determine who is speaking or who is being voiced (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2005).

2.4 Summary

This chapter discussed how I have approached the investigation on the PS and its associated writing and evaluation practices, drawing on the notion of literacy in New Literacy Studies and the academic literacies perspective (Lea & Street, 1998) as my theoretical and methodological framework. I have discussed the distinction between concepts of ‘literacy event’ and ‘literacy practice’, drawing on Street’s accounts (2003) to help handle the patterns of activity around literacy. The discussion on the academic literacies approach introduced by Lea and Street provides a useful perspective to approach student writing as a social practice that enables me to go beyond rhetorical move-step analysis and approach meanings as contested amongst

⁵ Relational value is concerned with the social relationships “which are enacted via the text in the discourse” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 93). Specifically, it may identify social relationships between the producer of the text and its recipient.

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students, academics, and institutions. Informed by the academic literacies perspective, my thesis focuses particularly on issues of writer identity as presented in their PSs, and writer-reader perceptions and assumptions of the PS, and also takes account of the cultural and institutional components that are associated with the PS. I have also reviewed issues of writer voice and identity, which I intend to explore in relation to the PSs. In order to examine students' PSs and student and academic interview data more closely, I have drawn on metadiscourse analysis (Hyland, 2005) and the notion of 'identification' (Fairclough, 2003), respectively to achieve this aim.

In the next chapter, I will provide detailed accounts concerning the data collected in my study and will also discuss how different sources of data are analysed drawing upon the analytical concepts that I have outlined in Chapter 2. I will also discuss the relationship between the academic literacies theoretical stance that I have adopted in my study and my own research design.

Chapter 3 – Methodology and methods

In this chapter, I begin with a summary of my research aims and research questions. This chapter also discusses the relationship between the academic literacies theoretical stance and my research design. This chapter provides an account of the sampling strategies (i.e. the participant selection) and procedures of data collection used. The ethical considerations associated with the data collection procedure are also discussed. Finally, I exemplify how I have applied the analytical methods/concepts that I outlined in Chapter 2 to analyse the data I collected in this study.

3.1 Research aims

Building on the discussion in Chapters 1 and 2, this thesis investigates students' identities as presented in their PSs; the assumptions and interpretations that have been made about this type of text by students and academics, and writing and evaluation practices associated with the PS across institutional contexts. My thesis explores four research questions and its overall aim is to further the current understanding of PSs in relation to higher education applications:

1. How do students position themselves in their PSs during the writing process?
2. What are the interpretations and perceptions that have been formed by students and academics concerning the PS at the two focal universities?
3. Are there any mismatches between the views of students and academics concerning the PS, at the two focal universities?
4. Are there any institutional variations across the graduate programmes, at the UK-based and US-based universities, with regards to literacy practices associated with the PS at the two focal

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universities? If so, how have these variations led to different meanings associated with the PS?

These research questions serve as a useful platform upon which I can explicate the rhetorical, ideological, and epistemological aspects of literacy practices that are associated with the PSs. The academic literacies theoretical stance that I have adopted in my study allows for an exploration of these issues in relation to PSs, including the text itself, student writers' views (applicants), and readers' expectations (academics) and helps to gain an insight into students' literacy practices of the PS and academics' admissions practices when evaluating the PS.

3.2 Research design

In line with previous academic literacies research (Lea & Street, 1998; Lea & Stierer, 2009; Lillis, 2008), this study focuses on the investigation of both texts and their associated writing and evaluation practices. Specifically, in addition to textual analysis, my overall research design for this study can be considered as an exploratory qualitative investigation of PSs. It adopts an 'ethnographic perspective' as opposed to 'doing ethnography' (Green & Bloome, 1997, 1983) to investigate the interpretations and assumptions of the students and academics concerning the PS texts. The 'ethnographic perspective' that I am working with here differs from the typical approach of ethnography that involves long-term immersion and engagement in the field of study with its roots in anthropology and adopts first-hand empirical exploration (i.e. participant observation⁶) of what people do and say in particular research settings (Hammersley, 2006). However, given the purpose of this study and the resources available, I did not use the method of participant observation and did not engage in particular sites over extended periods of time as such an approach would lead to ethical and practical difficulties in relation to my study. Specifically, the method of observation proved to be difficult in terms of tracking students' writing processes and evaluations carried out by academics of the application within the short timeframe of my research project. In this context, student applicants may

⁶ The method of participant observation allows one to "describe what goes on, who or what is involved, when and where things happen, how they occur, and why – at least from standpoint of participants – things happen as they do in particular situations" (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 12).

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often take a long time to compose their PSs before their official submission for application, and they might not stay in one place during this time period. Also, thinking from the perspectives of the student applicants, it can be argued that they may not feel comfortable having the researcher (i.e. myself) observe their writing processes. They might also feel uneasy about revealing information about which universities they intend to apply to. In light of this concern, it was more appropriate for me to approach students who had already completed their PSs and submitted their applications. For academic faculty members, it would be also difficult to observe their practices of evaluating students' PSs during the admissions procedure as it is normally considered to be a highly confidential and sensitive process that leads to decisions being made about which students will be accepted for courses. With these considerations in mind, the participant observation approach has not been adopted in my research.

So, based on this methodological decision, I do not claim that this study is an in-depth 'ethnography' in its full sense of that approach; rather, as indicated above, I have adopted an 'ethnographic perspective' with particular focus on the meanings, perceptions and interpretations of the subject being studied from *insider* or *emic* point of view, as the ethnographic perspective involves (Hamilton, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Consistent with this emphasis, in-depth interviews were used to explore the ways in which key or knowledgeable informants (i.e. students and academics) produce meaning in relation to the production and evaluation of PSs. Methodologically, a concern with investigating the emic or research participants' perspectives through in-depth interviews has helped me move away from a sole emphasis on the collection and analysis of written texts toward a consideration of writer-reader insider perspectives. Whilst acknowledging that "interviews [may be] a peculiarly effective means for realising this ethnographic principle – [capturing participant perspectives]", it may undermine "the links that ethnographers typically make between interview and observational data, for example, in terms of a contrast between what people say and what they actually do" (Hammersley, 2006, pp. 9-10). In order to tackle this issue, and in acknowledgment of the fact that such a method of observation would present difficulties for my study, as discussed earlier, I incorporated the component of 'talk

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around texts' (Lillis, 2008; Barton, 2001) in interviews, with the aim of achieving a range of "[writer-reader] insiders' comments, perspectives, and discourses, whether or not these relate to a research focus (textual or otherwise) predefined by the researcher" (Lillis, 2008, p. 360). The specific procedures that were used during the interviews will be detailed in the following section of this chapter.

Drawing on such a perspective, this research uses students' PSs as case studies (Yin, 1993, 2009; Bryman, 2001), with particular focus on these texts as well as students' writing practices and their interpretations of the PS, and also the conceptions of academics regarding the PSs. Specifically, I was not searching for 'typical cases' that consider the issue of generalisations and representation for the larger data set but instead, I have drawn on 'telling cases' (Mitchell, 1984) which pull together different pieces of data to present a coherent picture of the concepts and issues under study. In light of this point, Mitchell (1984) has stated that "a good case study, therefore, enables the analyst to establish theoretically valid connections between events and phenomena which previously were ineluctable" (p. 239). My data comprises students' PS texts, comments made by students and academics regarding the PSs, and in-depth semi-structured interviews that I conducted with students and academics. These different data sources can be seen as different aspects of the "case studies of different perspectives on academic literacies" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 160).

As my study is informed by theoretical and methodological foundations of qualitative research, it is concerned with "understanding the meanings that people attach to phenomena (actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc.) within their social worlds" (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 3). Snape and Spencer (2003: 3-5) have provided key components that are featured in qualitative research:

- aims which are directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories
- samples that are small in scale and purposively selected on the basis of salient criteria

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- data collection methods which usually involve close contact between the researcher and the research participants, which are interactive and developmental and allow for emergent issues to be explored
- data which are very detailed, information rich and extensive
- analysis which is open to emergent concepts and ideas and which may produce detailed description and classification, identify patterns of association, or develop typologies and explanations
- outputs which tend to focus on the interpretation of social meaning through mapping and ‘re-presenting’ the social world of research participants

My data collection and analysis procedures, which will be detailed later, were shaped by the considerations described above. As is the case with all research, the methods adopted in this study are influenced by “the aims of the research and the specific questions that need to be answered” (Ritchie, 2003, p. 34). My data includes both “naturally occurring data” and “generated data” (ibid. pp. 34-37). The ‘naturally occurring data’ is gained from the natural settings in which this type of data is “an ‘enactment’ of social behaviour in its own social setting, rather than a ‘recounting’ of it generated specifically for the research study” (ibid. p. 34). In other words, this type of data (e.g., participant observation, documentary analysis) does not usually involve participants’ restatement or descriptions of their views or how something happened as it is occurred in a ‘real world’ context (ibid. p. 34).

Unlike ‘naturally occurring data’, ‘generated data’ “involve[s] ‘reconstruction’ (Bryman, 2001) and require re-processing and re-telling of attitudes, beliefs, behaviour or other phenomena”; this includes different forms of interviews (i.e. semi-structured interviews), and focus group discussions (ibid. p. 36). As I wanted to investigate students’ PSs and explore their writing practices and academics’ interpretations of this type of text, I have collected students’ PSs as ‘naturally occurring data’ and conducted semi-structured interviews with the students and academics, which I have treated as ‘generated data’ in order to gain an insight into their assumptions and interpretations of the PSs and “an understanding of the meaning that they attach to them” (Ritchie, 2003, p. 36). Accounts concerning the

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data collected (i.e. PS documents and interviews with students and academics), the procedures for data collection and the analysis of these data sources, are detailed in the following sections.

3.3 Research methods

3.3.1 Participants and research sites/contexts

The participants in this research project are comprised of 22 doctoral students and 19 members of academics from one UK-based and one US-based university. Both are research-intensive universities. Eight doctoral students and nine members of academics are from the UK-based institution, and 14 doctoral students and 10 academics come from the US-based institution. These participants, both students and academics, are from the field of education. The reason for confining participants within a particular academic domain is that I would be able to compare and contrast their views, and interpretations that are associated with PSs across institutional contexts (UK-based and US-based institutions). It should also be noted that although these participants are all from the field of education, they do not belong to the same programmes of study. In other words, different research strands/programmes exist within the field of education in the two focal institutions. For instance, at the focal UK-based institution, the doctoral degree programme in education consists of several research groups with specific expertise. At the focal US-based institution, the department of education offers many doctoral programmes with distinct specialties and specific course requirements.

The term ‘academics’ in my thesis refers to people who actually evaluate students’ applications and have the power to influence the admissions decision. Specifically, for the UK-based institution, the members of academics that I recruited are individual ‘supervisors’ who have the power to determine which students will be admitted onto a course. Specifically, the doctoral admissions are processed by members of academics in the department and their job is to look at individual applications and decide whether the department can offer the expertise to match the applicants’ research interests; they also need to decide whether they will have the time to take on more students. Unlike the UK-based university, the members of the academics that I recruited at the US-based university serve as doctoral admissions

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committee members and will evaluate applicants' applications. These committee members are regarded as being leading academics within the programmes that I have investigated. Based on this discussion, the terms 'supervisor' and 'committee member' are used in my study to represent the academics involved in evaluating the application documents at both the focal UK-based and US-based institutions. Tables 3.1–3.4 below provide a brief description of student and supervisor/committee member participants collected from the two focal institutions:

Table 3.1 Student participants at the focal UK-based institution

Student pseudonym	Sex	Research groups*
Flower	Female	Research group 1
Anna	Female	Research group 1
Maria	Female	Research group 1
Jill	Female	Research group 1
Margaret	Female	Research group 2
Emma	Female	Research group 3
Edward	Male	Research group 3
Jack	Male	Research group 4

*To ensure anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, the names of these research groups have not been revealed. Here, the numbers (1-4) represent different research groups within the department of education.

Table 3.2 Supervisor participants at the focal UK-based institution

Supervisor pseudonym	Sex	Research groups*
Steven	Male	Research group 1
Jason	Male	Research group 1
Bill	Male	Research group 1
Sam	Male	Research group 2
Betty	Female	Research group 2
Grace	Female	Research group 2
Susan	Female	Research group 3
Alex	Male	Research group 3
George	Male	Research group 5

*The numbers in Table 3.2 represent the same research groups as those shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.3 Student participants at the focal US-based institution

Student pseudonym	Sex	Programmes*
Joy	Female	Programme A
Denny	Male	Programme A
Emily	Female	Programme A
Joseph	Male	Programme A
Charles	Male	Programme A
William	Male	Programme B
Debbie	Female	Programme B
Erica	Female	Programme B
Alice	Female	Programme B
Samantha	Female	Programme C
Dana	Female	Programme C
Kevin	Male	Programme D
Tommy	Male	Programme D
James	Male	Programme E

*The letters (A-E) in Table 3.3 represent different doctoral programmes within the school of education.

Table 3.4 Committee member participants at the focal US-based institution

Committee member pseudonym	Sex	Programmes*
Max	Male	Programme A
Jennifer	Female	Programme A
Sally	Female	Programme A
Christine	Female	Programme B
Ariel	Female	Programme C
Michelle	Female	Programme C
Carol	Female	Programme C
Victoria	Female	Programme C
Allen	Male	Programme D
Roy	Male	Programme D

*The letters in Table 3.4 represent the same programmes as those shown in Table 3.3.

3.3.2 Data collection procedures

Sampling strategies

Sampling in qualitative research is a complex issue since there are many variations of qualitative sampling, as demonstrated in existing studies (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Coyne et al., 1997). Compared with sampling strategies in quantitative research, sampling procedures in qualitative research are much more flexible; issues like the sample size (whether or not it is adequate) and random sampling for obtaining statistically representative samples are not the primary concern of qualitative research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Flick, 2006; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). It is commonly recognised that the aim of qualitative research is to reach an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena and to contribute

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something new to existing theory (Marshall, 1996; Cohen et al., 2000a; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Rolfe, 2006; Flick, 2006). For this reason, qualitative sampling selects samples that will provide as much detailed information as possible for the research focus (Marshall, 1996).

In my study, I apply ‘purposeful sampling’ to two sets of data – students’ PSs and interview data – during the process of data collection (Coyne et al., 1997; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mason, 2002; Seale, 1999). According to Patton (1990), the “purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” and “information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 169). However, it is important to also acknowledge that during the process of a study, new themes or categories may emerge, which will prompt the researchers to do more sampling or modify their original samples in relation to that emerging dimension (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). As a result, a follow-up investigation would be required to examine the new dimension and consequently, this would lead to a follow-up data collection since the initial data would not be sufficient to address the emerging issues.

The total number of students and academics that I recruited in my study is guided by ‘purposeful sampling’. Specifically, the majority of the student participants were in their first (and a few in their second) year of doctoral studies at the time when this research was conducted and, as such, their memories of PS writing practices were more recent, especially when compared to those of doctoral students who have reached the final stages of their studies. For the academics, I only focused on those individuals who have been involved in the application evaluation process since they would have more experience of reading and evaluating student PSs.

The use of students’ Personal Statements

Students’ PSs were collected from the two focal institutions, one in the UK and the other in the US. These PSs were written by doctoral students who are studying at the two focal institutions. For the focal UK-based institution, I obtained students’ contact information through my personal connections with some of the students at that institution. At the focal US-based institution, most of the students were

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identified and contacted through public email addresses that were listed on the institution's website while a few were recruited through personal contact. These prospective students were approached and contacted via email. They were invited to participate in my research and those who agreed to do so were asked to provide their PSs and were also recruited for interviews. The information sheet concerning what might be asked of them whilst participating in this research, and a consent form for them to complete, were also attached in the email communication with the students.

A total of 15 PSs (submitted versions for the applications) were collected: 3 of these documents were from the focal UK-based university and 12 from the US-based one. It should be noted that as I was also interested in students' writing processes at different stages of their PS writing, I collected draft copies of the PSs as well as the final versions. An investigation of these different PS drafts would allow me to identify the modifications that students made and these documents would also serve as evidence of the progress made during the different stages of student writing.

Table 3.5 below summarises the total number of PSs and the earlier drafts offered by each student participant at the focal UK-based institution. Within a British context, the doctoral applications process requires students to submit both their research proposal and PS. In this thesis, I focus only on the PS for the purposes of comparing and contrasting PSs that are submitted to the focal US-based institution. For this reason, my study excludes the research proposal from this investigation. Table 3.5 below thus does not summarise the data of research proposals that I also collected from students at the focal UK-based institution. However, I acknowledge that there may be a certain connection between the PS and the research proposal since both play a part in the application package to the UK-based institution. In light of this point, in my discussion, where appropriate, I will draw on the views of students and academics concerning the research proposal, since it may contribute to an overall understanding of the role of the PS in the admissions process in the UK-based institution.

Table 3.5 Students' PSs and different drafts from the focal UK-based institution

Student pseudonym	PhDPS* and drafts	Other documents provided by participants
Flower	PS, no prior drafts obtained	Guideline that she used during her writing process
Anna	PS and three prior drafts	Anna's PS for her MA studies applications; certificates that she submitted for her PhD application
Maria	PS, no prior drafts obtained	Six PSs for her MA studies applications
Jill	No PS or draft obtained	No
Margaret	No PS or draft obtained	No
Emma	No PS or draft obtained	No
Edward	No PS or draft obtained	No
Jack	No PS or draft obtained	No

*PhDPS stands for the Personal Statement for doctoral studies applications.

As can be seen in Table 3.5 above, five out of eight students' PSs were not obtained. The reason for these missing PSs is that some students could not locate their PSs and some had forgotten they had written one for their doctoral study applications. I will explain this point further in the data analysis chapter since this has emerged as an important part of the evidence that sheds light on students' assumptions about PSs in PhD study applications. Table 3.6 below summarises the PSs collected from student participants from the focal US-based institution:

Table 3.6 Students' PSs and different drafts from the focal US-based institution

Student pseudonym	PhDPS* and drafts	Other documents provided by participants
Joy	PS, no prior drafts obtained	No
Denny	PS, no prior drafts obtained	No
Emily	PS, no prior drafts obtained	No
Joseph	No PS or draft obtained	No
Charles	No PS or draft obtained	No
William	PS, no prior drafts obtained	No
Debbie	PS, no prior drafts obtained	No
Erica	PS, no prior drafts obtained	No
Alice	PS and 7 drafts obtained	No
Samantha	PS, no prior drafts obtained	No
Dana	PS and 3 drafts obtained	No
Kevin	PS, no prior drafts obtained	No
Tommy	PS and 3 drafts obtained	No
James	PS and 2 drafts obtained	No

*PhDPS stands for the Personal Statement for doctoral studies applications.

As shown in Table 3.6, most of the students at the focal US-based institution sent their PSs to me and some of them also provided different drafts of their PSs. Two of

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these students did not send me their PSs as they felt uncomfortable about sharing them with me. They stated that some information in their PSs was quite personal; however, they agreed to be interviewed about their experiences of writing their PSs and their views on it.

The use of student and academic interviews

In line with the ethnographic perspective that is indicated in section 3.2, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews rather than other forms of interviews (e.g., structured interviews) with the students and academics at both institutions. This form of interviewing allowed me to “obtain as full and unbiased an account as possible of the participant’s perspective of the research topic” (Legard et al., 2003, p. 158). Legard et al. (2003) state that the initial responses from interviewees are very often at a “fairly surface level” (p. 141) and hence follow-up questions are needed to elicit more participant-oriented meaning. For instance, ‘probing questions’ (e.g., ‘could you say something more about that?’) and ‘interpreting questions’ (e.g., ‘you mean that...?’) have been used to elicit the meaning of what is said as well as how it is said in interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, pp. 135-136). Also, aligned with the ethnographic perspective, I considered the interview process to be more like a lengthy ‘conversation’ in which “the way the researcher probes for detail, for clarity or explanation, and his gestures which signal normal surprise and even disbelief, provide him with the means for shaping an interview in this way” (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973, p. 72). In light of this point, instead of having a standardised list of pre-arranged questions, the design of my interview questions included a broad guidance list of important topic areas that were associated with my research interest; this provided less of a structure and offered, instead, a relatively flexible approach that allowed for the interviewees’ responses to be probed and explored further (Legard et al., 2003). In other words, the interview questions developed during the actual process and in interactions between the participant and the interviewer. In order to help participants feel comfortable about sharing their experiences with me, the issue of confidentiality was discussed at the beginning of each interview session. I also briefly explained the purpose of the research as well as the aim of the interview. After a brief introduction regarding the aim of the interview, I began by asking questions about the students’ and academics’ general perceptions of PSs (the

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first stage) before moving on to their comments on the students' own PSs (the second stage: 'talk around texts'). They were encouraged to respond as freely as possible during the interviews. One student participant stated that she did not feel she was being interviewed; rather, she felt like she was simply sharing her writing experiences with a friend. The ethical issues that relate to the process of data collection will be discussed further later on in this chapter.

The choice of an in-depth interview method also conforms to Snape and Spencer's (2003) ideas of data collection methods in qualitative research, as outlined in section 3.2 in this chapter. A 'purposeful sampling' strategy (Patton, 1990) was adopted for follow-up investigation of information-rich cases during the process of data collection. Specifically, I determined which participant would be invited to offer further information based upon the emerging themes from their initial interviews with me. This sampling strategy allows implicit themes to emerge; they could then be explored further as the data gathering process continued.

I contacted student participants via email. Those who agreed to be interviewed were asked to provide their PSs as well as all the different drafts that they may have produced (if any) prior to the interviews. I took a brief look at these texts and got a sense of the topics and content written by the students in their PSs. With a general idea in mind about the content of their PSs, I was able to gain more of an idea about how they would then respond to my questions during the interview. For instance, when I asked the students what they perceived to be the most important content/elements that must be included in their PS, they responded that it was important to include and describe their past research experiences since they were applying for a research degree and their role would be that of a researcher. In this respect, I could to some extent connect what they said with the actual text that they had written.

Two stages of in-depth, semi-structured interview schedules for the students were involved in the process of this investigation. Each interview with the students lasted approximately 60 minutes. Some students had a couple of follow-up interviews with me as they had a lot of information to offer and they were very willing to share their

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experiences and views on PSs with me. During the *first* stage of the interview, I conducted a participant-oriented discussion of how the student perceived their PS and, at the same time, explored other aspects associated with the PS writing process. In other words, the participants were encouraged to respond to my questions as freely as possible and the proceeding questions were based on the participant's initial responses which I then probed further (Legard et al., 2003).

The questions for the *first* stage of student interview were centred around five key topics (*see* Appendix 5 for guiding questions for student interview): (1) general questions about the students' perceptions of the PS; (2) their previous writing experiences; (3) any writing assistance received; (4) writing difficulties (if any) that they encountered throughout the process of the write up, (5) writing strategies that they adopted for their PS. These interview questions were based on concepts that emerged from my small-scale exploratory study (as shown in Chapter 1: section 1.3) and my own personal experiences of applying to academic institutions in the UK and US, as well as assisting other students with their PS for university applications. These key topics were designed with flexibility in mind and allowed me to explore the beliefs, attitudes, and reasons that underpinned the accounts offered by participants. The *second* stage of the interview focused on the students' commentary on their PSs. The interview data was audio-recorded.

In terms of academic participant interview, I approached the academics via email that was listed on the institution's website. Those who agreed to participate in my research were asked to read a couple of students' PSs that were sent to them before the interview. Three or four PSs were sent to each member of academics prior to the interviews. Each interview lasted 30 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded. Similar to the interviews conducted with students, there were two stages of an interview schedule for academics (*see* Appendix 6 for guiding questions). The *first* stage focused on an investigation of the academics' assumptions about the PS, their practices of evaluating these texts and the role of PSs during admissions. The guiding interview questions for the academics at the first stage contained two key aspects: (1) the general admissions process at the institution where they are based; (2) their perceptions of different parts of the application documents (i.e. application

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form, academic transcripts, references). The *second* stage of the interview focused on the academics' comments/feedback on students' PSs that were sent to them prior to the interviews. The academics commented freely on these PSs. For instance, they spoke about language issues, such as grammar and lexical choices, and about broader textual issues, such as writing style, organisation of the PSs and content students chose to include in their texts.

The second stage of the interview process, for both students and academics, was associated with the method of 'talk around texts' (Lillis, 2008), as indicated in section 3.2. It seems to me that this method is similar to what Lea and Stierer (2011) have stated in relation to "facilitating discussion around documents" (p. 606). Such a method has aided an understanding of what has been perceived as relevant and important from the perspectives of the participants (Lillis, 2008). Specifically, 'talk around texts' implies a relatively open-ended approach which draws attention to the emergent themes based on participants' perspectives and extends "the researcher-analyst's gaze beyond the text" (Lillis, 2008, p. 361). Interviews with the students and academics allowed the interview questions to be determined by the participants' accounts instead of being prefigured, which allowed for a participant-oriented meaning to be explored and penetrated in greater depth. In that sense I would describe the interviews as adopting an 'ethnographic perspective'. Here, I will first illustrate the method of 'talk around texts' drawn from student participants' interview data and follow that with the data from the academics.

The student participants were asked to comment on their PSs and also elaborate the ways in which these documents were written. Hardcopies of their PSs were brought to the interviews either by students themselves or by me. Concerning the students who provided several drafts in addition to the final version of their PSs, I was able to ask them to describe the writing process from draft to draft. The example detailed below, from a student's interview, illustrates the method of 'talk around texts' where the perspectives of participants are foregrounded. The case is drawn from one of my student participants at the focal US-based institution. He commented on his PS as follows:

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Example 1 (Student ‘talk around texts’)

Student’s text

I spoke with Dr. Howard and Dr. Yang (pseudonyms) during my campus visit. Their passion in Education and quantitative methods impressed me. I believe the RDA (pseudonym) program is a perfect fit for me. For my future study, I will focus on learning advanced tools of statistics well. At the same time I am eager to take a variety of education courses. Not only will they provide me with necessary background knowledge, but I expect them to also inspire me for my future research.

Student’s comments on his PS

I included this because I want to remind them [the target academics] that I did come to visit them and talk with them and I mentioned the name, it, it proved that I, I did research around their programme and I know them pretty well, not just sending application, I want to enter their programme, to tell them I am really interested, yeah.

The extracts in Example 1 are a small portion of a longer commentary from the student about the way in which he composed his PS. This example helps me connect between what the student did in his PS and how and why he has constructed his PS in a particular manner.

The academic participants were asked to read some PSs prior to the interview and then provide their comments on these texts during the interview. Such a method helps instantiate how the academics interpret PSs and address a range of writing issues that the academics were concerned about. As I wished to identify what was considered by the academics to be most important and relevant in their evaluations of the PSs, no specific instruction was given to them during this phase. In other words, they were asked to comment on the texts freely, again an example of how my approach derived from an ‘ethnographic perspective’. The academics were also asked to imagine that they were in the position of evaluating these PS texts during the admissions period, thus allowing me to gain a feel of what the academics would consider when judging the applications of potential PhD candidates. This method proved to be extremely useful as it provided data that would illustrate a link between the perspectives of the academics on the PSs (e.g., looking for strong student motivation for their proposed study) and how these perspectives might be

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conceptualised through the ways in which the academics commented on samples of the PSs. The extracts below illustrate an example of the comments offered by one of the academics concerning the PS written by a student. This student applicant (James) wished to pursue his doctoral study with a focus on mathematics curriculum and instruction in urban school settings. In his PS text, he provided details of both his teaching experiences in relation to mathematics in various educational settings and his reflections on these experiences, which appeared to have contributed to his desire to pursue this level of study (*see* Appendix 7 for the full version of this student's PS). In the interview, the academic was asked to provide his thoughts and impression in relation to this student's PS. An extract from the PS is shown below:

Example 2 (Academics 'talk around texts')

Student's PS text

Although an urban community provides sufficient challenges for those involved in curriculum planning and instruction, there are unique educational opportunities present in these communities which, if understood, can enhance student learning. The social factors affecting success and the varied learning experiences present as the student maneuvers from school, home, and within in the larger community must be studied so that their positive influence on student learning can be realized. Despite the fact I have realized the importance of these considerations, methods of identifying and taking advantages of these considerations have not always been easily determined. Through further study of these topics, I hope to integrate them into my understanding of all that an educator can do to maximize effectiveness.

Interview comments by the academic on the student's text

I felt like that person, I liked that, that stance of "Yes, there are challenges but there are also opportunities here." It seemed very positive to me, and like somebody who could really, um who is able to see things from different perspectives and to be able to see possibility where other people don't. [...] Like it's really hard to be a teacher. And it's really easy to blame lots of different factors. But you have to ((laughs)) I think to do, to be engaged in the long-term you have to have this like kind of hope and this belief in possibility, and I saw that really strongly.

Example 2 above reveals the evaluative statements regarding the academic's impression of the student's PS, with particular reference to the extract above.

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Specifically, it seems to be the case that the way in which the student expressed her experiences and opinions sounds appealing to the academic, as evident in the academic's use of phrases such as, 'very positive', 'able to see things from different perspectives', and 'be able to see possibility where other people don't'. This example draws attention to an important research method involved, including ethnographic perspective in allowing participants to express their opinions freely and then an analytic lens that focuses on reader interpretation of the text, thereby strengthening the exploration of how meanings are made through interaction between the text and its readers. Comments offered by the academics on PSs also provided rich empirical data to complement their general responses to what is considered as being desirable or undesirable elements within PSs.

Tables 3.7 and 3.8 below summarise the interview data I collected from both focal institutions:

Table 3.7 Student and supervisor interview data from the focal UK-based institution

Student/supervisor pseudonym	Mode	Duration/interview times (Minutes)
<i>Students</i>		
Flower	In person	71.24/1
Anna	In person	222.01/4
Maria	In person	58.31/1
Jill	In person	42.56/1
Margaret	In person	146.15/3
Emma	In person	61.42/1
Edward	In person	53.00/1
Jack	In person	58.21/1
Total minutes: 712.9		
Average: 54.84/per participant		
<i>Supervisors</i>		
Steven	In person	42.55/1
Jason	In person	56.44/1
Bill	In person	49.35/1
Sam	In person	150.79/3
Betty	In person	78.39/1
Grace	In person	41.17/1
Susan	In person	47.18/1
Alex	In person	35.37/1
George	In person	44.43/1
Total minutes: 545.67		
Average: 49.61/per participant		

Table 3.8 Student and committee member interview data from the focal US-based institution

Student/committee member pseudonym	Mode	Duration/interview times (Minutes)
<i>Students</i>		
Joy	In person	20.58/1
Denny	In person	27.12/1
Emily	In person	39.17/1
Joseph	In person	34.55/1
Charles	In person	32.17/1
William	In person	33.43/1
Debbie	In person	42.11/1
Erica	In person	47.59/1
Alice	In person	40.13/1
Samantha	In person	40.26/1
Dana	Skype	56.70/1
Kevin	In person	32.34/1
Tommy	In person	45.27/1
James	In person	40.11/1
Total minutes: 531.53		
Average: 37.97/per participant		
<i>Supervisors</i>		
Max	In person	52.13/1
Jennifer	In person	13.47/1
Sally	In person	29.57/1
Christine	In person	43.39/1
Ariel	In person	37.31/1
Michelle	In person	57.47/1
Carol	Written	N/A
Victoria	In person	70.11/1
Allen	In person	49.22/1
Roy	In person	21.57/1
Total minutes: 374.24		
Average: 41.58/per participant		

As can be seen in Tables 3.7 and 3.8, the average time for an interview with student participants at the focal US-based institution, when compared with the focal UK-based institution is less. The reason for this variation is that the student participants at the focal UK-based institution were also interviewed about their writing experiences of the research proposal, which is a part of the application requirements. In light of this fact, the average time for interviewing each student participant at the focal UK-based institution was expected to be a bit longer than those at the focal US-based institution.

3.3.3 Ethical considerations and the challenges of data gathering

It is commonly acknowledged that ethical issues must be considered if the research involves human participants (Warren, 2002; Creswell, 2008). The emphasis on ethics in research is based on “the protection of individuals from harm through guarantees of confidentiality, anonymity and informed written consent” (Walsh & Downe, 2006, p. 116). This current study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at King’s College London (REC Protocol Number: REP (EM)/09/10-3). In adherence to its ethical codes of professional conduct, my study involved the use of information sheets and consent forms during the process of participant recruitment (*see* Appendices 8 and 9 for the information sheet and consent form for my research). During initial email contact with the prospective student and academic participants, an information sheet was forwarded to them, which included information pertinent to the purpose of the investigation. It documented the process (explaining when, where, how long etc), the potential risks and benefits the research could bring, and a statement about how anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained. The potential participants were also given a copy of the information sheet to keep. Once it was established which students and academics would be participating, a consent form was sent to them via email to confirm their consent to participate. The form also explained their right to disengage their participation at any time. It was also made clear to them that the information and data collected would be appropriately stored and secured, in accordance with the Data Protection Act (DPA) which refers to proper data management during the study. The information sheet and consent form were written and presented in a clear manner, using succinct language that would be easily understandable to my participants. At the beginning of each interview, student and academic participants were asked to sign the consent form to make sure their rights would be protected. However, a few of my participants felt a bit uncomfortable about signing the form as they perceived it to be a legally binding document. In order to tackle this situation, I obtained their verbal consent that was audio-recorded.

Based on King’s ethical guidelines, any prior relationship between the researcher and potential participant must be taken into account as it may create potential problems, like prompting emotional reactions from the participants. Since some of my

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participants were my friends or colleagues at the focal institutions, this ethical issue must be brought to the fore and acknowledged, especially because it impacts upon the use of interview data as a research method for my research. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state “the personal consequences of the interview interaction for the subjects need to be taken into account, such as stress during the interview” (p. 63), the practices of ‘trust’ that would minimise the risk of mental discomfort, and ‘confidentiality’, all of which became a vital component for the interviewer-interviewee relationship during the research process. For example, I noticed that a few of my student participants felt a bit under pressure and nervous during their interviews and this was probably because they wished to present themselves in a particular way that they thought would meet my expectations. One of my student participants kept asking me questions such as *‘am I answering your questions?’*. Another reason for this anxiety might be the potential power relations formed between the researcher and their informants (Brenner, 2006). Specifically, the participants understood that the information they provided would be used and reported by me as a researcher. Similar situations also occurred during interviews with the academics. For instance, when they expressed their views about the PS and its role in the admissions process, they might also be wary of what they could say in their positions as faculty members who would take charge of the admissions process and would also be handling confidential information. In view of this ethical issue, I did my best to ensure they felt they could respond freely. I was able to sense which areas of the discussion they found most interesting, important and comfortable to share with me and together we were able to keep the focus on such issues. A statement about confidentiality was brought to the attention of all the participants in order to minimise their concerns.

Addressing these issues raised some challenges for the research. For instance, during the stage of data collection, initial attempts were made to recruit participants who belonged to similar disciplinary areas (i.e. language and literacy), but since the amount of data collected in this way proved to be relatively small at the early stage of recruitment, I then chose to collect data from broader subject areas within the field of Education because this would allow me to contextualise and broaden the scope of the findings. In light of this methodological decision, as a way of facing the

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challenge posed by the amount of data my initial method generated, I paid attention to the similarities as well as variations across the PSs written for different programmes of study during the process of data collection and analysis. The other challenge that I faced during the process of data gathering was related to interviews with academics. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, some students' PSs were sent to the academics for evaluation prior to their interview with me. Since the student and academic participants belonged to the same institutions, I was aware that some academics might be able to identify certain students from having previously evaluated their PSs. Such a situation might generate some hesitation and unease when the academics were invited to comment on these texts written by the students with whom they already had some form of professional association. In order to tackle this ethical issue and maintain anonymity and confidentiality, I chose to mix and match the PSs written by students from different research groups/programmes when sending them to academics who were also from different research topic areas at the institutions. For instance, at the focal US-based institution, the PSs written by students belonging to programme A were sent to academics that did not teach that programme.

3.4 Data analysis procedures

In this section, my procedures of analysing students' PS texts and students' and academics' interview data are discussed. Here, it should be noted that the notions, such as 'literacy events' and 'literacy practices', and 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of literacy, which I outlined in Chapter 2, do not involve in the process of analysing my different data sources; however, where appropriate, these concepts are drawn upon for discussions in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 where I discuss the views of the students and academics concerning the PS for the postgraduate programme applications and its associated writing and evaluation practices across the two focal universities in my study.

3.4.1 Students' Personal Statements

For the purpose of analysing the students' PSs, I have drawn upon Hyland's metadiscourse analysis, as described in Chapter 2, to help examine the interaction and communication through the mediation of these texts. In this context, such

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analysis offers a means of understanding how student applicants project themselves into their PSs by establishing their attitudes towards both the content and the audience of the text (Hyland, 2005). The linguistic devices that are listed under the ‘interactive’ (e.g., ‘frame markers’, ‘code glosses’) and ‘interactional’ (e.g., ‘boosters’, ‘self-mentions’) categories were used to analyse the meanings of statements made by the students (*see* Chapter 2 for a full account of this analytical tool). One important point to note here is that in the process of analysis, I do not attempt to determine the function of metadiscourse markers in the students’ PSs by merely matching them with those that appear in Hyland’s list for each metadiscoursal strategy (Hyland, 2005, pp. 218-224). Instead, I acknowledge that “metadiscourse cannot be regarded as a strictly linguistic phenomenon at all, but must be seen as a rhetorical and pragmatic one” (Hyland, 2005, p. 25). For instance, the conjunction ‘but’ can function as an interactive metadiscoursal marker that helps to connect propositions (e.g., ‘he promised he would come *but* he did not’) while it can also function as an interactional metadiscoursal marker that “[engages] the reader as a participant in the discourse” (ibid. p. 42, e.g., ‘the city is a great place to visit *but* would you want to bank there?’). This example illustrates the fact that language expressions cannot be interpreted without considering the context in which they occur, whilst they are “surrounding co-text”, and also up for consideration is “the purpose of the writer in creating a text as a whole” (ibid. p. 24). In alignment with this view, the students’ PSs were analysed by taking into account each textual context in the PSs and considering its purpose for conveying the applicant’s motivation for their proposed study, as well as any other relevant information in support of their applications. In the following section, I will demonstrate how I have applied these metadiscoursal categories to explore students’ PSs. The text I am referring to here was written by a Greek doctoral student (Anna) as a part of her application documents for a doctoral programme in the UK-based institution. The excerpt from Anna’s PS is as follows:

Student PS text (the opening paragraph in Anna’s PS)

Excerpt 3.1

I cannot find **any better way** to start this statement than with **a quotation by Socrates: ‘the only thing I know is that I know nothing’** (**ἐν οἶδᾷ ὅτι οὐδὲν οἶδᾷ**). His words nicely express **my** profound beliefs

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on spiritual cultivation and my desire for expanding my knowledge continuously and persistently.

Table 3.9 Metadiscoursal resources in Anna's PS (opening paragraph)

Interactive resources	Examples from Excerpt 3.1	Interactional resources	Examples from Excerpt 3.1
Transitions	✕	Hedges	✕
Frame markers	✕	Boosters	'any better way'
Endophoric markers	✕	Attitude markers	'any better way'
Evidentials	'Socrates' quotation'	Self-mentions	'I', 'my'
Code glosses	✕	Engagement markers	✕

Note: The mark '✕' in Table 3.9 means that such type of metadiscoursal resource is not found in the opening paragraph in Anna's PS.

Several metadiscoursal resources were use by Anna in her PS. For example, in Excerpt 3.1, the use of Socrates' quotation ('the only thing I know is that I know nothing') can be viewed as an 'evidential' that refers to the source of textual information outside the current text (Hyland, 2005). The 'evidential' marker can be understood as an example of "metalinguistic representations of an idea from another source" (Thomas & Hawes, 1994, p. 129), which help to "guide the reader's interpretation and establish an authorial command of the subject" (Hyland, 2005, p. 51). In this case, the use of Socrates' quotation can be seen as an attempt by the student to align herself with a belief as that has also been proposed by others. Additionally, the words 'I' and 'my' in Excerpt 3.1 can be interpreted as 'self-mention' markers as they refer to "explicit authorial presence in the text" (Hyland, 2005, p. 53). In other words, Anna's use of self-mention markers was able to reveal her authority as the source of the content of the text. This statement would sound different if Anna used 'impersonal forms', such as 'no better way can be found...', which would reveal relatively less certainty and authority on the writer's behalf. Also, as can be seen in Table 3.9, the phrase 'any better way' can be viewed as both an attitude marker and booster that indicate the writer's attitude towards the propositional content and emphasise the force of their propositions (Hyland, 2005). Hence, this example here reinforces what was stated earlier in this section, that a metadiscourse analysis needs to take into account both the textual context and purpose of such a written text.

3.4.2 Interview data analysis

In order to explore writer-reader perceptions about the PSs from the point of view of the students and the academics that were interviewed at the two focal universities, two phases were involved for this process. In the *first phase* of the interview analysis, I conducted ‘thematic analysis’ (Ritchie, Spencer, & O’Connor, 2003; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) for the purposes of identifying themes and establishing categories in relation to the students’ and academics’ assumptions about the PS. For the *second phase* of my analysis, I adopted Fairclough’s notion of ‘identification’ to investigate participants’ attitudes and their intended meanings when delivering their views on a particular topic in the interviews.

Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis is to “classify and organise data according to key themes, concepts and emergent categories” (Ritchie et al., 2003, p. 220; *see also* Burnard, 1991). This method will produce a detailed and systematic coding category during different stages of the analysis. Burnard (1991) has described fourteen stages for applying ‘thematic analysis’ to interview data. Here, I will not describe all of these stages in detail. Instead, I will discuss the general procedures that I have adopted from Burnard’s approach.

According to Burnard (1991), the initial stage of approaching data includes writing ‘notes’ and ‘memos’ that attract researchers’ attention when observing the data. At this stage, the data collected during interviews with students and members of academics was transcribed verbatim (*see* Appendix 10 for samples of student and academic interview data). When the transcripts are ready for analysis, the researcher is expected to read through the transcripts carefully and gain a general idea of the content. This stage allows the researcher to familiarise themselves with the data collected and get a sense of it as a whole before its themes are identified (*see also* Ritchie et al., 2003; Rabiee, 2004). Following on from this stage, the researcher is able to create as many headings as necessary via an ‘open coding’ process which can be used to break down, compare, and conceptualise data for the purposes of observing emerging patterns/themes (Burnard, 1991). Here, it should be noted that

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my interview data was coded inductively rather than deductively, meaning that I did not use coding frame(s) based on existing theoretical ideas. Instead, I chose to develop my coding framework around the data itself. However, it should be noted that the process for identifying themes was guided by my research focus. Specifically, I was interested in investigating the perceptions of students and academics in relation to the PS and its associated writing and evaluation processes. Therefore, this stage of analysis allowed me to identify recurring themes or concepts in relation to this research focus. For instance, the emerging themes might include a consideration of ‘student suitability’ which emerges from interviews conducted with the academics.

To assist with this coding process, I used qualitative research software, *NVivo 8* (produced by QSR International) to help me manage, code, and make sense of the data systematically. This software provides a useful means for organising data into categories and identifying the parts I should focus on for an in-depth analysis. As the coding process proceeds, researchers can collapse the headings and create ‘higher-order’ headings for similar concepts until a final list of categories (‘coding frame’) has been established (Burnard, 1991, p. 462). Similar to Burnard’s thematic analysis, Ritchie and Spencer (1994) also states that once the initial themes or concepts have been identified, a process is required for: “identifying links between categories, grouping them thematically and then sorting them according to different levels of generality so that the index has a hierarchy of main and subthemes” (cited in Ritchie et al., 2003, p. 222). This coding process allows me to identify themes regarding the assumptions made by students and academics about the PSs.

It is acknowledged that the inter-rater reliability of the coding frame is important (Morse et al., 2008). Burnard (1991) suggests two ways of checking its reliability: firstly, researchers can ask a colleague who may not be familiar with their study to read through some transcripts and to identify a coding category. The new coding category that is produced is then compared with existing categorisation already identified by the researcher. A coding category may be modified or fine-tuned whenever necessary. The second way in which its reliability can be enhanced is to ask the interviewees to read through the transcripts of their interviews and to write

down the themes that interest them. The themes generated by these informants can then be compared with the researcher's list of codes. Again, adjustments may then be made to the researcher's existing categories for coding. Whilst working with these techniques, I asked one of my colleagues to code two transcripts (one by a student participant; the other by a member of academics). I then discussed the similarities and differences between these coding categories with my colleague. This would ensure my coding system "is fairly transparent, coherent and understandable, as opposed to an idiosyncratic, opaque system of interpretation devised by a single researcher" (Joffe & Yardley, 2004, p. 63).

After coding all the interview data, the researcher is able to collect each code section of the interviews and all the items for each code; a process of comparison can then begin. At this stage, Burnard stated the possible pitfall for the misinterpretation of the meaning of the strings of words that have been taken out from their original context to be collected for the purpose of noting patterns. For this reason, it is important to maintain the "context of the coded sections" (Burnard, 1991, p. 463). He also suggests that referring to the recording is necessary in order to make sure it "stay[s] closer to original meanings and contexts" (ibid. p. 464). A developed coding frame can provide a good platform for an in-depth exploration of my participants' accounts. More specifically, I looked closely at the data, which the coding has identified for the close analysis from discourse analytical perspectives.

Analysis of participants' 'identification' in interviews

As I have mentioned earlier in this section, I paid attention to particular sections of my participants' statements, which have been identified in the initial stage of 'thematic analysis' to strengthen the understanding of meaning in my participants' talks. To achieve this aim, I have drawn upon Fairclough's analytical concept of 'identification' that I outlined in Chapter 2 to closely analyse particular sections of my participants' talks; this concept supports my investigation of 'how' speakers construct their meanings in a particular way. According to Fairclough (2003), the notion of 'identification' emphasises "the process of identifying, how people identify themselves and are identified by others" (p. 159). In my analysis, I paid attention to the linguistic categories of 'pronouns' and 'modality' that are associated with the

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process of speaker's 'identification' as they are most relevant to my focus on understanding of how speakers express their views on a particular topic.

As I have discussed in Chapter 2, there are two dimensions of 'modality': 'epistemic modality' is concerned with the degree of certainty and commitment to truth as well as the reliability of sources of knowledge for supporting one's claims ('knowledge exchange'). In contrast to the epistemic modality, a 'deontic modality' is associated with the author's commitment to obligation and necessity ('activity exchange'). Since my purpose for interviewing these participants was to acquire information concerning their views and attitudes towards PSs, it can be inferred that the nature of these interviews is mainly based upon a 'knowledge exchange' between interviewees and the interviewer. For this reason, I focus mainly on 'epistemic modality' as it is more relevant to my interview data. Here I demonstrate how I have applied the concept of 'modality' with an example drawn from my data. The following excerpt is taken from one of my interviews with the students. The respondent, Anna, was discussing how she used what was written in the PS for her MA application when she later composed her PS for a PhD application in the UK-based institution:

Student's interview

Excerpt 3.2

Anna: ...the first sentence [in Anna's PS for her MA study application] is not me. I wouldn't even try to say what teaching is. It's very hard to say that and I never use such strong sentences, such strong statements...

In Anna's comments about her PS for the MA application, she used 'epistemic modality' with the speech function of denial statements (e.g., the first sentence is 'not' me) to show her commitment to the truth towards her claims for her disagreement with what appeared in her MAPS. The expressions that follow – 'I wouldn't *even* try to say what teaching is', 'it's *very* hard to say that', and 'I *never* use such strong sentences' – can be viewed as strong statements in that they contain strong modal adverbs, such as 'even', 'very', and 'never' to strengthen the author's commitment to the propositions. Her statement would come across differently if no

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modal adverbs were used here, such as ‘I wouldn’t try to say what teaching is’, ‘it’s hard’, and ‘I wouldn’t use such strong sentences’.

In addition to the notion of ‘modality’, my other focus in this study is the use of ‘personal pronouns’. These may indicate a sense of the speaker’s ‘individuality’ and ‘collectivity’ (Fairclough, 2003). The following is an example drawn from my interview with a member of the academics (Roy) from the US-based institution:

Academic’s interview

Excerpt 3.3

Roy: The screening process depends heavily on the GRE scores and for us high quantitative scores are essential. Good verbal scores are desirable so we rely on both but the quantitative is weighted more... GRE is the first cut. If the scores are too low we don’t bother going any further ... ‘cause the kid is just not going to survive.

In Excerpt 3.3, Roy used the inclusive pronouns ‘us’ and ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ and ‘me’ to indicate a sense of ‘collectivity’ (Fairclough, 2003). In his accounts, Roy seems to align himself with a group of people. Specifically, he appears to suggest that a personal perspective on the GRE score in the admissions evaluation process matches the view of other faculty members in the programme. This standpoint can be associated with the concept of ‘identification’ (Fairclough, 2003). That is, as a member of the admissions committee, Roy should possess a clear idea of how the admissions process works, including how much weight each part of the application document carries, and the other faculty members’ practices of application evaluation. Roy’s statement suggests that in the case of the particular programme where he is based, it is clear that if the students’ GRE scores are too low, their PSs may not even be evaluated in the process.

3.5 The use of the concept of ‘ideology’

Another key concept in the academic literacies approach on which I draw, is that of ‘ideology’ and I make reference to this in my discussion chapters. Specifically, I have adopted an ‘ideological stance’ which is regarded as “transformative rather than normative”, as discussed by Lillis and Scott (2007, p. 12) in relation to the issues of

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ideology and epistemology in academic literacies research. Aligned with this stance, as indicated in Chapter 1, the focus of my study is not to seek similarities (i.e. rhetorical structures) amongst students' PSs within specific disciplines and academic communities, as the 'normative' perspective would suggest; instead, it is concerned with exploring the processes of meaning-making, drawing on the perspectives of writers and readers and an investigation of text itself, as explained by Lillis and Scott in their recent work (2007), as well as other authors in their special issue (i.e. 'New Directions in Academic Literacies Research') of the *Journal of Applied Linguistics* devoted to this issue (e.g., Ivanič & Satchwell, 2007; Curry, 2007; Chihota, 2007). However, it should be noted that the concept of 'ideology' is not highlighted as strongly in this thesis as in some of the sources (cf. Lillis & Scott, 2007; Street, 1984; Ivanič & Satchwell, 2007). This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, after extending my use of relevant literature on (academic) literacies studies, I have come to realise that the term 'ideology' may carry a much wider conceptual meaning than is relevant for my approach. For instance, as indicated by Meighan and Siraj-Blatchford (1997: 180):

Ideology is defined as a broad interlocked set of ideas and beliefs about the world held by a group of people that they demonstrate in both behaviour and conversation to various audiences. These systems of belief are usually seen as 'the way things really are' by the groups holding them, and they become the taken-for-granted ways of making sense of the world.

While I aim to identify the assumptions of a group of students and academics regarding PS texts across institutional contexts, an important question raised here is: to what extent can the key features and assumptions about the nature of the PS, derived from my study, be claimed as being at the level of 'ideology'. In other words, if the notion of 'ideology' is conceptualised and understood as, for example, the political ideologies (e.g., the nature of liberalism) that underpin the worldview of particular institutions and have shaped the ways in which people in such contexts act and think in relation to particular discourses, then it is important to understand this wider and deeper context (e.g., from cultural and historical perspective) of the academic institutions in which the writing and evaluation practices that are associated with PS texts occur. Such an exploration may also imply "a commitment

to staying rooted in people's lived experiences" in specific contexts (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 13). However, given the scope and the focus of my study, it is not my intention to investigate how a broader so-called 'ideology' – "the systematization of congruent societal beliefs" (Hayden, 1988, p. 419) – influences the ways in which students and academics think and what they do in relation to the PS writing and evaluation practices. Instead, as an exploratory study, its aim is to examine issues of meaning-making within the text itself, the student writers, and academic readers and their responses to the texts. Specifically, I investigate students' PS texts, with a focus on the interpretations and assumptions of students and academics regarding this type of text, and the practices and conventions in relation to the PS across institutional contexts. In that sense, I draw upon the social literacies perspective which recognises that claims to neutrality, as in the 'autonomous' model of literacy, are in fact ways of hiding 'ideological' approaches to literacy, but in this case I am not in a position to pursue an analysis of 'ideology' *per se* in relation to student writing in general and the PS in particular, even whilst making due acknowledgment that the positions are not as 'neutral' as some commentators might suggest. As the findings in my study, then, may not carry the weight of what the notion of 'ideology' entails and embodies more fully, I have replaced the term 'ideology', where appropriate in my discussion chapters, with a more specific use of words, such as 'perspectives', 'understandings', and 'interpretations'. These terms can indicate the views of students and academics in relation to PS texts, and they are terms that have also been used in Lea and Street's (1998) article on student writing in higher education even whilst that perspective does in fact draw upon the 'ideological' model of literacy. Like them, I recognise the limits of what I can claim with that regard in this particular piece of research. In my study, then, the phrase 'institutional ideology' was also revised as 'institutional practices' throughout the discussion in reference to an institutional understanding of writing and evaluation practices within and across particular institutional and epistemological contexts.

3.6 Theoretical and methodological challenges

This study draws on multiple theoretical and analytical perspectives to investigate the PS texts and their associated writing and evaluation practices. Specifically, the academic literacies perspective (Lea & Street, 1998, 2006), which views writing as a

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social practice, is adopted in this study as my theoretical framework to conceptualise PS writing. At the same time, as noted earlier, I have recognised the ideological underpinnings that such research acknowledges whilst, like Lea and Street (1998) in their paper on academic literacies, is not necessarily putting the term ‘ideology’ up front. In line with this perspective, my study draws upon specific concepts in the field of social literacies, academic literacies, discourse analysis and genre, whilst recognising the limits of their application to this particular data set and the methodology for its collection. The focus, then, is on exploration of students’ PS texts and the research participants’ perspectives through in-depth interviews, drawing on those analytical concepts, which I argue can help to provide useful lenses for exploring the PS text in particular and the practices surrounding the production and interpretation of this type of document. This section describes the challenges and tensions of integrating these various perspectives in my study, with particular focus on the combination of linguistic analytical means and a social practice approach.

Given the need to unpack the meanings of the texts under consideration, as discussed earlier in chapters 2 and 3, I drew upon Hyland’s (2005) metadiscourse analysis to explore the PS texts. I also made some use of Fairclough’s (2003) concept of ‘identification’ especially with reference to the linguistic features of ‘modality’ and ‘personal pronouns’ that were helpful in examining student and academic interview data. I found Ivanič’s (1998) lens of writer identity helpful in investigating how students have constructed meaning in their PSs. Here, it should be noted that the analytical concepts that I have drawn upon in my study are not necessarily housed under the broader academic literacies theoretical framework and the theorists themselves might not have expected their ideas to be used in this way, although Ivanič for instance does herself make positive links to the social literacies perspective. Although some of the approaches, then, may appear to be contrasting due to their distinct theoretical and methodological foundations, they can be drawn together to help me investigate meaning from text itself as well as from the perspectives of students and academics.

During the process of data analysis and writing up my findings, certain challenges and tensions have become evident with particular reference to the combined use of

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Hyland's metadiscourse analysis and Ivanič's aspects of writer identity for the purposes of exploring my first research question regarding how students may position themselves in their PSs, as will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5. A recognisable tension is that the metadiscoursal categories proposed by Hyland may not be sufficient enough to address the dynamic issues associated with how a writer may project his/her intended meaning in text and their development of identity, as is revealed by a more social practice approach. For example, as will be seen in Chapter 5, where I explore potential links between the use of metadiscourse and its connection to the relevant writer identity, the student's (Anna) use of 'engagement markers' ('you', 'your') in her text can be seen to serve to explicitly address readers and draw them into the discourse (Hyland, 2005). From a perspective informed by metadiscourse, it is possible to reveal Anna's awareness of a relationship with her readers who act as gate-keepers in the admissions process. However, an analysis of student interview data, via the lens of writer identity, as proposed by Ivanič, appears to indicate a more complex story to support the writer's intended meaning. For example, in addition to the reference made about the writer's awareness of potential readers, Anna's use of 'engagement markers' seems to be somewhat detached (or suppressed) from her sense of 'self as author' (*see* the detailed discussion in Chapter 5, section 5.1.4). Specifically, the student has stated that the paragraph (as shown below) in which the 'engagement markers' were used did not represent her well.

Anna's PS (final paragraph)

Lastly, I am very looking forward to the prospect of doing a research degree at University of Lefka (pseudonym), a university renowned for the excellence of its teaching and the calibre of its graduates. Being able to study a research programme at *your* University and learn from specialised professors and leading principles in my subject area would fulfil my goals towards achieving my ideal professional study. Therefore, if *you* decide to accept my application it would be a great opportunity which I am prepared to take full advantage of.

In the interview Anna stated that she wrote this paragraph, which reveals her desire to study at the target institution and compliments both the readers and the institution, followed a common belief that many student applicants do this and she had simply conformed to this strategy. From this discussion, I would suggest that the findings of

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a metadiscourse analysis do not fully reveal with what has been found via a social practice approach. Such a tension between two approaches may be due to the fact that metadiscourse analysis focuses primarily on texts and it is concerned with a systematic analysis of the “explicit devices which can be clearly identified in the text” (Hyland, 2005, p. 58). In contrast, a social practice approach to writing considers that “practice is privileged above text” which emphasises the exploration of what people do and think when they interact with texts in specific sociocultural contexts (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 10). As such, it can be said that relying merely on text analysis to understand student writing may not capture the processes involved in meaning-making. I also assert that what is left unsaid would be just as important as what is said, as Fairclough (2003) states, “meaning-making depends upon not only what is explicit in a text but also what is implicit – what is assumed” (p. 11).

Whilst acknowledging the limitation of the textual description from metadiscourse analysis, in my study there was also a need to adopt a more systematic means of approaching the PS texts themselves. As the PS is a required document that students have to complete as a part of the process for their entry into a target academic community, from my ethnographic perspective, it was important to fully understand the students’ meaning behind what students intended to do in their PSs and said about it in the interviews. In this context, a close look at the writing itself did offer me further data to supplement the commentaries offered by students during their interviews. The use of a metadiscourse approach has allowed me to foreground how meaning has been articulated through the mediation of texts and to approach the texts systematically. Whilst Lillis and Scott (2007) have pointed out that “the principal achievement of academic literacies research has been to dislodge the text as linguistic object as the primary focus and to direct attention towards the practices in which texts are embedded”, they also point out that from this perspective such “texts, and more importantly, detailed analysis of texts can disappear altogether” (p. 21). In light of this reminder, it can be said that although metadiscourse may “give no firm evidence about author intentions” or practices, as the social literacies approach argues, it does provide “a useful means of revealing the meanings available in the text and perhaps some of the assumptions writers hold about the issues they address and the ways they see their audiences” (Hyland, 2005, p. 59). At the same time, a

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social practice approach to writing can help the analysis to move beyond a textual level and link specific instances of language use to a much wider cultural and social framework (Lillis & Scott, 2007). Based on this discussion, I believe both text analysis and social approaches can be jointly worked together and be used to investigate meaning from my data and thereby, contribute to the overall understanding of the PS and its associated writing and evaluation practices.

3.7 Summary

In this chapter, I introduced my research design and methodology. My study is informed by theoretical and methodological foundations of qualitative research that allows for an in-depth understanding of the students' PSs and practices that are associated with such documents. I also gave a summary of the data that I collected. Specifically, the students' PSs as well as interview data with students and academics from the two focal institutions are the main sources of data for this research. In terms of data analysis, I discussed how I applied Hyland's metadiscourse analysis and Fairclough's concept of 'identification' to my data. The following chapters will report the findings based on the analysis of the collected data.

Chapter 4 – Written communication: Metadiscourse and students' Personal Statements

This chapter is the first of four analysis-based chapters in this thesis. The present chapter focuses on the exploration of students' PSs through the lens of metadiscourse. This current chapter and Chapter 5 concentrate on exploring the issues relating to writer identity and self-representation as presented in the PSs. These two chapters contribute to the understanding of my first research question concerning how students position themselves in their PSs during their writing process. Chapters 6 and 7 respectively explore the assumptions of the students and academics concerning the PSs for PhD applications at the UK-based institution and the US-based one.

In this chapter, the data that I draw on are two students' PSs – Anna's PS for her PhD application to the UK-based university and Alice's PS for her PhD application to the US-based university (*see* Appendices 10 and 11 for Anna's and Alice's PSs, respectively). The reason why I have not used all the PS texts that I have collected for this thesis is because my focus is not to work out the similarities concerning the textual features amongst these PSs collected nor to come up with a desirable textual model of PSs for prospective students to follow. Rather, my focus is to draw attention to how the students compose their PSs through the lens of metadiscourse. The choice of Anna's and Alice's PSs is because these two cases appear to be the most "information-rich cases" (Patton, 1990, p. 169) amongst others. Specifically, as I have shown in Tables 3.5 and 3.6 in Chapter 3, which show the amount of data I have collected per student from the focal UK-based and US-based universities. Specifically, at the UK-based university, Anna provided me with her PS for her PhD study application as well as three other prior drafts of her PS. Also, she was the only student participant from the UK-based institution who actually provided detailed accounts concerning the writing processes of her PS. The same reason also applies to Alice's case in that she provided her PS and seven prior drafts of her PS for her PhD study application to the US-based institution.

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I draw upon Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse analysis, as outlined in Chapter 2, to examine Anna's and Alice's PSs. Specifically, I use these metadiscoursal analytical categories to help identify instances on the students' PSs where metadiscoursal functions are performed in order to analyse the intended meanings by the students. The analysis in this chapter is primarily concerned with the textual function(s) of metadiscoursal resources that are internal to its written discourse through the lens of metadiscourse. Such an analysis serves as an important part of the process in understanding the writing practice of students as metadiscourse emphasises the "dialogic role of discourse by revealing a writer's understanding of an audience through the ways that he or she addresses readers and their needs" (Hyland, 2005, p. 13). The findings that derive from the current chapter will be complemented by the interview data in Chapter 5 where I take Anna's case further to address the core of the 'meta' aspect of the metadiscourse in which the writer's communicative intentions through the use of metadiscoursal resources can be critically examined in conjunction with her interview data.

In the following sections, I will discuss the metadiscourse in Anna's and Alice's PSs. This chapter also includes a discussion concerning the issues that emerged in the process of operationalising the metadiscoursal concept in analysing the PSs. There will also be discussion concerning the notion of 'multifunctionality' (Hyland, 2005, p. 59) in relation to the actual use of language in texts to identify the potential limitations of such metadiscourse analysis.

4.1 Metadiscourse in Anna's Personal Statement for postgraduate application in the UK-based university

To illustrate how the metadiscoursal resources indicated by Hyland can be used to analyse the attempts by the focal students to organise a discourse and facilitate some form of interpersonal communication with the readers in the context of a postgraduate university application, I will begin by describing some of the results of my study of Anna's PS (*see* Appendix 11 for a full version of Anna's PS).

A close analysis of Anna's PS indicates that both 'interactive' and 'interactional' metadiscoursal resources are found in this student's text. More specifically, all sub-

categories, including ‘transitions’, ‘boosters’, and ‘attitude markers’ and many others under ‘interactive’ or ‘interactional’ dimensions, are identified in the text. The following are selective instances of metadiscoursal resources that can be identified in the student’s text (*see* Appendix 12 for a full version of the metadiscoursal resources in Anna’s text). For convenience, these metadiscoursal resources are presented as bolded text in each example. The extent to which sentences were drawn from the student’s text depends upon the sentential co-text where each metadiscoursal resource occurs.

Interactive resources

Transitions

Examples:

- (1) Specifically, I tried very hard and achieved excellent results for my academic performance in all subjects (see Appendix 1). **Besides** this, I cultivated my personality and learned to be responsible and care for other beings.
- (2) My university education was intense and demanding **but** simultaneously fulfilling and stimulating (see Appendix 2 – detailed transcript of my undergraduate courses). **Worth mentioning, too**, is that I have chosen to do this particular degree **because** I love children and admire their spontaneity, sincerity and creativity. **Additionally**, having my mother as a model, who is also a primary school teacher, I was introduced to the magical world of education...
- (3) **Noteworthy**, as part of my degree in the *University of Lefka* (pseudonym) I had to fulfil a school practicum in my final year.
- (4) **What is worth mentioning, too**, is that, since I believe that education cannot be achieved only through books, I was involved in a number of extra activities.
- (5) Through the readings of the various classes I have attended so far, I have had the opportunity to enrich my knowledge with notions of bilingualism and multilingualism... **But most important of all**, I have gained understanding on several policies, theories and practices regarding the teaching...
- (6) **Moreover**, art is one of my favourite hobbies because it helps me to express my feelings and clear my thoughts...
- (7) Additionally, I have a great passion in music and I have passed a number of music exams. **The fact that** I have been attending piano

lessons from the age of six, have helped me relax and gain confidence.

- (8) **Consequently**, my brief **but** valuable experience has sparked my desire to become a successful primary school teacher and to be able to make a difference in the world of the increasingly multilingual Greek Cypriot education.
- (9) During this period, I faced the challenges, responsibilities, complexities and possibilities arising in multilingual and multicultural classrooms with children from diverse backgrounds. **However**, since my core primary teacher education course did not give me the chance to acquire knowledge in linguistically diverse topics, I was unable to respond to these challenges.

The above instances of metadiscoursal resources (1 – 9 with the specific resources shown as bolded text) can be viewed as ‘transitions’ (Hyland, 2005) as they set up relations amongst propositions and express metadiscoursal functions. In Examples (1) to (7), the use of the words/phrases such as ‘besides’, ‘worth mentioning, too’, ‘additionally’, ‘noteworthy’, ‘what is worth mentioning, too’, and ‘moreover’ signals ‘additive’ relations amongst ideas. One point to note here is that the words/phrases in Example 2 (‘worth mentioning, too’), Example 3 (‘noteworthy’), Example 4 (‘what is worth mentioning, too’), Example 5 (‘but most important of all’), and Example 7 (‘the fact that’) can be also interpreted as either ‘boosters’ or ‘attitude markers’ as these ‘interactional’ metadiscoursal resources reveal the writer’s perspective towards both “propositional information and readers” (Hyland, 2005, p. 52). The discussion of how these words/phrases function as ‘boosters’ or ‘attitude markers’ will be detailed later.

Different from the use of ‘transitions’ as signalling ‘additive’ relations, the use of ‘because’ in Example (2) reveals the ‘causal’ relations amongst propositions. The word ‘because’ in this case indicates the reason for the student’s choice of pursuing a particular degree. In other words, this ‘transition marker’, from Hyland’s perspective, serves the function of helping the readers interpret “pragmatic connections between steps in an argument” (ibid. p. 50).

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In Examples (2) and (8), the word ‘but’ reveals ‘contrastive’ relations amongst propositions that “mark arguments as different” (ibid. p. 50). For instance, the word ‘but’ in Example (2) was employed to bring out the contrastive statements about the student’s university education’ (e.g., ‘intense’, ‘demanding’) and her views on this educational experience (e.g., ‘fulfilling’, ‘stimulating’). The use of ‘but’ in this statement (‘my university education was intense and demanding *but* simultaneously fulfilling and stimulating’) can be also regarded as a positive endorsement to the proposition (‘my university education’). Similarly, the word ‘but’ in Example (8) also indicates ‘contrastive’ relations that determine the logical relationships amongst propositions for the readers. One interesting point that appears in both examples (2 and 8) is that the use of ‘but’ appears to occur under the situation where it performs as connecting adjectives with different connotations (e.g., ‘intense and demanding *but* simultaneously fulfilling and stimulating’, ‘my brief *but* valuable experience’). The use of ‘but’ in both cases seems to be used to bring out the writer’s evaluations of the propositions (e.g., the student’s university education and her teaching experiences). Similar to the use of the word ‘but’, the word ‘however’ in Example (9) also functions as signalling ‘contrastive’ relations amongst propositions.

In Example (8), the word ‘consequently’ signals ‘consequence’ relations amongst the propositions. The statements that precede the word ‘consequently’ are concerned with student’s teaching experiences while the statement that follows the word ‘consequently’ reveals the student’s desire for teaching and education. The word ‘consequently’ in this case brings out ‘causal’ relations between these two propositions. In other words, it functions as an expression that shows the second statement follows logically from the previous statement.

The discussion shown above (Examples 1 – 9) is concerned with the instances of metadiscoursal markers as ‘transitions’ and these are mainly conjunctions and adverbial phrases, which Hyland suggests help readers interpret “connections between steps in an argument” (Hyland, 2005, p. 50). In contrast, the word ‘therefore’ in Example (10) below, at first glance, seems to be used as a ‘transition marker’. However, this word in this case does not function as a metadiscoursal marker as it functions as “connecting activities in the world outside the text

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(*external*)” rather than “organising the discourse as an argument” (*internal*, Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 165). The distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ reference is crucial as Hyland acknowledges that many textual items can “realise either interpersonal or propositional functions depending on their contexts” and thus there is a need to distinguish their “primary function in the discourse” (ibid. p. 165).

- (10) Being able to study a research programme at your university and learn from specialised professors and leading principles in my subject area would fulfil my goals towards achieving my ideal professional study. **Therefore**, if you decide to accept my application it would be a great opportunity which I am prepared to take full advantage of.

As can be seen from Example (10) above, the word ‘therefore’ functions as a connecting device to express a relation between “activities and processes” that are “experientially oriented” (Hyland, 2005, p. 46) rather than to set up relations amongst propositions in the discourse. In Example (10), the statement that precedes the word ‘therefore’ refers to the student’s comments in relation to her proposed field of study and her goals while the statement that follows the word ‘therefore’ seems to indicate what will happen, provided that a certain situation is given. In this case, the two sentences that are linked by the word ‘therefore’ appear to have no direct connection. More specifically, the word ‘therefore’ signals “a consequence concerning how something will happen in the world” (ibid. p. 46) rather than constructing logical relations that are ‘internal’ to the steps in the arguments.

Frame markers

Example:

- (11) **Lastly**, I am very looking forward to the prospect of doing a research degree at *University of Putney* (pseudonym), a university renowned for the excellence of its teaching and the calibre of its graduates. Being able to study a research programme at your University and learn from specialised professors and leading principles in my subject area would fulfil my goals towards achieving my ideal professional study.

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Based on Hyland's definition of 'frame markers', the word 'lastly' in Example (11) above can be viewed as a 'frame marker' as it functions as signalling "text boundaries or elements of schematic text structure" (Hyland, 2005, p. 51). The word 'lastly' in this case is the start of the student's concluding paragraph of her PS, which can be interpreted as functioning to "sequence parts of the text" because this word brings out the student's concluding statements concerning her wish to study at the target programme.

Endophoric markers

Examples:

- (12) Specifically, I tried very hard and achieved excellent results for my academic performance in all subjects (**see Appendix 1**).
- (13) My university education was intense and demanding but simultaneously fulfilling and stimulating (**see Appendix 2** – detailed transcript of my undergraduate courses).
- (14) This study has been presented in the conference 'Quality in Education: Research and Teaching' (**see Appendix 3** – schedule of the conference).

The 'interactive' resources that appear in the examples above (as in 12 – 14) function to "make additional information salient and "therefore available to the reader in aiding the recovery of the writer's meanings" (Hyland, 2005, p. 51). The phrases 'see Appendix 1', 'see Appendix 2' and 'see Appendix 3' in these examples can be interpreted as a way in which the student intends to refer to other parts of the text in order to make additional information available, provide supporting arguments and thus guide the reader toward a preferred interpretation (Hyland, 2005). For instance, in Example (12), the phrase 'see Appendix 1' leads the readers to the information that appears in other parts of the text to support her statement about her excellent academic performance. Similarly, Example (14) also contains an 'endophoric marker' 'see Appendix 3' that guides the readers to the additional information to support the writer's statement. However, the 'endophoric marker' in Example (13) is slightly different from those in Examples (12) and (14) as there appears to be no direct connection between the propositional information and the additional information available in the student's 'Appendix 2'. The propositional information is

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concerned with Anna's view of her university education ('intense and demanding but simultaneously fulfilling and stimulating') while the information she attempts to provide is the detailed transcripts of her undergraduate courses. Therefore, in this case, it may not be clear whether or not this 'endophoric marker' is used to facilitate comprehension and support arguments.

Evidentials

Example:

- (15) I cannot find any better way to start this statement than with a quotation by **Socrates**: '**the only thing I know is that I know nothing**' (*ἐν οἶδα ὅτι οὐδέν οἶδα*).

In Example (15), the use of Socrates' quotation can be viewed as an 'evidential' that refers to the source of textual information outside the current text (Hyland, 2005). The marker of 'evidentials' can be understood as "metalinguistic representations of an idea from another source" (Thomas & Hawes, 1994, p. 129), which help to "guide the reader's interpretation and establish an authorial command of the subject" (Hyland, 2005, p. 51). In this case, the use of Socrates' quotation in Example (15) can be seen as the student aligning herself with the same belief as that proposed by others.

Code glosses

Examples:

- (16) During my school years, I learned that nothing is accomplished without hard work, persistence and sacrifices. **Specifically**, I tried very hard and achieved excellent results for my academic performance in all subjects...
- (17) During my studies at the *University of Lefka* (pseudonym), I completed several research projects. **Specifically**, I conducted a quantitative investigation...

The use of 'specifically' in Examples (16) and (17) can be viewed as 'code glosses' as it provides additional information by "elaborating what has been said to ensure the

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reader is able to recover the writer's intended meaning" (Hyland, 2005, p. 52). For instance, in Example (16), the statement that precedes the word 'specifically' refers to the student's view towards learning and hard work, and the statement that follows the word is concerned with her 'excellent academic performance' through hard work. This can be viewed as the student's attempt to supply more information to elaborate what she already stated in an earlier sentence. Likewise, the word 'specifically' in Example (17) functions as a 'code gloss' to supply a further explanation of what has been mentioned in the earlier statement.

Interactional resources

Hedges

Examples:

- (18) I have learned through this experience that the multilingual composition of modern societies **should not be considered** as a disadvantage and a weakness but as a creative and renewing source.
- (19) However, I strongly believe that a further exploration of the theories, principles..., **would** help me to develop a strong background on these theories and their practical implementations.
- (20) Being able to study a research programme at your University and learn from specialised professors and leading principles in my subject area **would** fulfil my goals towards achieving my ideal professional study.

In Example (18), the phrase 'should not be considered' brings out the student's "decision to recognise alternative voices and viewpoints and so withhold complete commitment to a proposition" (Hyland, 2005, p. 52) and thus it can be viewed as a 'hedge'. The student in this case made an 'advisable' commentary on her experience of being in 'multilingual composition of modern societies'. The phrase 'should not be considered' emphasises the writer's position by "allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact" (ibid. p. 52). This comes across differently from how it would if the student used much stronger 'modal auxiliary verbs', such as 'must', which signals 'necessary' or 'imperative' views towards the propositional information. Likewise, the auxiliary verb 'would' in Examples (19) and (20)

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expresses the student's opinion and hope and therefore, implies that "a statement is based on the writer's plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge" (ibid.).

Boosters

Examples:

- (21) "I **cannot find any better way** to start this statement than with a quotation by Socrates: 'the only thing I know is that I know nothing' (εν οίδα ότι ουδέν οίδα).
- (22) Through the readings of the various classes I have attended so far, I have had the opportunity to enrich my knowledge with notions of bilingualism and multilingualism... But **most important of all**, I have gained understanding on several policies, theories and practices regarding the teaching and learning...
- (23) However, **I strongly believe** that a further exploration of the theories, principles and practices in the field of second/additional language education and especially an examination of their effectiveness within the Greek Cypriot context...
- (24) What is worth mentioning, too, is that, since **I believe** that education cannot be achieved only through books, I was involved in a number of extra activities.
- (25) Additionally, I have a great passion in music and I have passed a number of music exams. **The fact that** I have been attending piano lessons from the age of six, have helped me relax and gain confidence.

The texts in bold above (Examples 21 – 25) can be considered as 'boosters' as they enable writers to "close down alternatives" and "express their certainty in what they say" (Hyland, 2005, p. 52). For instance, the phrase 'cannot find any better way' in Example (21) conveys the student's strong commitment to the text content. Similarly, the phrases in Examples 22 – 25 function as 'boosters' to emphasise force or writer's certainty in message. For example, the phrase 'but most importantly of all' in Example (22) strengthens the student's argument about what she has gained through her courses. The words 'I strongly believe' and 'I believe' in Examples (23) and (24) also explicitly express the student's rapport by "marking involvement with the topic" (ibid. p. 53). Likewise, the phrase 'the fact that' in Example (25) functions as a 'booster' to emphasise the propositional information the student intended to

provide for the readers. One point to note here is that some of the phrases in this section are overlapping with other type of metadiscoursal resources. For instance, the phrase ‘most important of all’ can also be seen as a ‘transition’ (interactive resource) and as an ‘attitude’ marker (interactional resource). Specifically, the phrase ‘most important of all’ signals ‘additive’ relations amongst ideas (*see* the discussion in ‘Transitions’ section). Concerning this phrase as an ‘attitude markers’, I will elaborate upon this function in detail in the next section. In addition to the phrase ‘most important of all’, the phrases ‘I strongly believe’ and ‘I believe’ in Examples (23) and (24) can function as ‘attitude markers’. In Example (25), the phrase ‘the fact that’ can also function as a ‘transition’ marker (*see* the discussion in ‘Transitions’ section).

Attitude markers

Examples:

- (26) “I **cannot find any better way** to start this statement than with a quotation by Socrates: ‘the only thing I know is that I know nothing’ (εν οίδα ότι ουδέν οίδα).
- (27) **Worth mentioning, too**, is that I have chosen to do this particular degree because I love children and admire their spontaneity, sincerity and creativity.
- (28) **Noteworthy**, as part of my degree in the *University of Lefka* (pseudonym) I had to fulfil a school practicum in my final year.
- (29) **But most important of all**, I have gained understanding on several policies, theories and practices regarding the teaching and learning of English as a second language in school settings...
- (30) However, **I strongly believe** that a further exploration of the theories, principles and practices in the field of second/additional language education...
- (31) **What is worth mentioning, too**, is that, since **I believe** that education cannot be achieved only through books, I was involved in a number of extra activities.

The word/phrases in Examples (26) to (31) can be considered as ‘attitude markers’ as they indicate “the writer’s affective, rather than epistemic, attitude to propositions” (Hyland, 2005, p. 53). That is, the ‘attitude markers’ convey “surprise, agreement, importance, obligation, frustration” amongst others (*ibid.* p. 53). The

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word/phrases ‘worth mentioning, too’ (Example 27), ‘noteworthy’ (Example 28), ‘but most important of all’ (Example 29), and ‘what is worth mentioning, too’ (Example 31) reveal the student’s attitude to the propositional information she intended to provide. These ‘attitude markers’ bring out the importance of the propositions that follow them. Similarly, the phrases ‘I strongly believe’ (Example 30) and ‘I believe’ (Example 31) function as ‘attitude markers’ while they convey the student’s agreement to the propositions rather than indicating the importance of the propositions.

One point to note here is that, the same as some of the cases in ‘Transitions’ and ‘Boosters’ sections, some phrases in this category can also perform as ‘interactive’ resources and as ‘interactional’ resources. For instance, the word/phrases ‘worth mentioning, too’, ‘noteworthy’, ‘but most important of all’, and ‘what is worth mentioning, too’ can also function as ‘transition’ markers as ‘interactive’ resources and amongst which, the phrase ‘but most important of all’ can also function as ‘boosters’. Additionally, the phrases ‘any better way’, ‘I strongly believe’, and ‘I believe’ can function as ‘boosters’ as they indicate the writer’s attitude towards the propositions (*see* the discussion in ‘Boosters’ section).

Self-mentions

Examples:

- (32) **I** cannot find any better way to start this statement than with a quotation by Socrates: ‘the only thing I know is that I know nothing’ (εν οίδα ότι ουδέν οίδα).
- (33) Worth mentioning, too, is that **I** have chosen to do this particular degree because **I** love children and admire their spontaneity, sincerity and creativity.
- (34) This is the reason why **I** have decided to pursue my studies in England.
- (35) During **my** school years, **I** learned that nothing is accomplished without hard work, persistence and sacrifices.
- (36) The fact that **I** have been attending piano lessons from the age of six, have helped **me** relax and gain confidence.

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- (37) Reading Greek and international literature was very beneficial as it helped **me** broaden **my** mind and look at everything from a different perspective.

The words ‘I’, ‘me’, and ‘my’ in the examples above can be interpreted as ‘self-mention’ markers as they refer to “the degree of explicit authorial presence in the text measured by the frequency of first-person pronouns and possessive adjectives” (Hyland, 2005, p. 53). In Anna’s PS, the ‘self-mention’ marker is the most frequent metadiscoursal resource the student used in her text. According to Ivanič (1998), the first-person pronoun may be the most powerful means of self-representation. The high use of the first-person pronoun in Anna’s text may be largely concerned with what Ivanič (1998) calls ‘self as author’, with the emphasis on the writer’s voice and the degree to which the writer views himself/herself as an author. For instance, in Example (32), the first-person pronoun, ‘I’ is used in the sentence ‘I cannot find any better way...’ to reveal her authority as the source of the content of the text. This statement would be different if the student used ‘impersonal forms’ to expressed a desire to pursue knowledge, such as ‘no better way can be found...’, which would reveal relatively less certainty and authority about the writer.

Engagement markers

Examples:

- (38) However, I strongly believe that a further exploration of the theories, principles and practices in the field of second/additional language education... This training is provided to me with the programme **you** offer, *** (the name of the programme) MPhil/PhD, in which I am particularly eager to enrol.
- (39) Being able to study a research programme at **your** University and learn from specialised professors and leading principles in my subject area would fulfil my goals towards achieving my ideal professional study. Therefore, if **you** decide to accept my application it would be a great opportunity which I am prepared to take full advantage of.

The second-person pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your’ in Examples (38) and (39) can be seen as ‘engagement markers’ that are used to “explicitly address readers, either to focus

their attention or include them as discourse participants” (Hyland, 2005, p. 53). In Example (38), the pronoun ‘you’ is used to refer to the readers as academics. Similarly, the pronoun ‘you’ in Example (39) also refers to the admission tutors. These cases can be interpreted as the student’s attempts to focus her readers’ attention and draw them into this written discourse. Compared with the other metadiscoursal resources, the ‘engagement markers’ seem to provide much more direct means to communicate with the readers as these markers address readers explicitly.

4.2 Analytical discussions from the analysis on Anna’s Personal Statement

Before I proceed to the discussion of Alice’s PS, I will examine some of the issues emerging from analysing Anna’s PS. My analysis on the metadiscoursal resources and their textual functions in Anna’s text seem to highlight the difficulties in distinguishing between the ‘interactive’ and ‘interactional’ functions of those metadiscoursal items. I have noted that some linguistic resources may perform more than one function at a time in the text. For instance, I have found that the functions of ‘transitions’, ‘boosters’, and ‘attitude markers’ overlap (*see* the discussion in section 4.1). For this reason, it can be said that in some cases, ‘transition’ markers are simultaneously ‘boosters’ or/and ‘attitude markers’, as shown in words/phrases like, ‘worth mentioning, too’, ‘noteworthy’, ‘but most important of all’, and ‘what is worth mentioning, too’. In particular, the ‘interactive’ resources that are used to organise propositional information can possibly be performed as ‘interactional’ resources that signal the writer’s perspectives towards both propositional information and the readers. In this sense, the ‘interpersonal model of metadiscourse’ proposed by Hyland (2005) seems to take a rather ‘binary’ view regarding metadiscoursal resources and divides them into ‘interactive’ and ‘interactional’ categories. In fact, Hyland himself also points out the limitation of this analysis since he states that “the imposition of discrete categories on the fluidity of actual language use inevitably conceals its multifunctionality, blurring simultaneous meanings in an ‘all-or-nothing’ interpretation of how particular devices are used” (Hyland, 2005, p. 59).

Since words/phrases can serve a ‘multifunctional’ purpose in relation to meaning and context, it would be more beneficial to collapse the binary categories of ‘interactive’

and ‘interactional’, and to then view these linguistic devices as a means of achieving their interpersonal meanings. This would also allow for the use of resources, such as ‘transitions’, ‘frame markers’, and ‘hedges’ in an analysis of the written communication without the need to match linguistic items into particular metadiscourse categories. Keeping this in mind, I will work with the idea that “all metadiscourse is interpersonal” (Hyland, 2005, p. 41) as operationalised by these metadiscoursal devices. In other words, the metadiscourse emphasises the “self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text” (Hyland, 2005, p. 37). Accordingly, I take the view that the instances of language use are tied to what people do (‘practices’) and these actions do not “exist in isolation” (Lillis & Scott, 2007, p. 11). In this context, it can be argued that the use of metadiscoursal resources may be associated with students’ self-representation in text as it is commonly the fact that students attempt to present themselves in their PSs, with the hope that what they have written in text will be convincing when it is read by academics. The issue of ‘self-representation’ in writing, according to Ivanič (1998), is related to writer identity which students bring to the act of writing. In order to explore the connection between the writer’s use of language and the identity that the writer brings to the act of writing, in the next chapter I will draw on Ivanič’s notion of writer identity as her conceptualisation of the writer’s representation of self provides a particularly useful means of investigating the ongoing meaning-making aspect of the student’s text. In the next section, I will discuss the other student’s PS (Alice).

4.3 Metadiscourse in Alice’s Personal Statement for postgraduate application in the US-based university

In section 4.1, I discussed how I had adopted Hyland’s (2005) ‘interpersonal model of metadiscourse’ in my own investigation of Anna’s PS for her postgraduate application to the UK-based institution. In this section, I will use the adapted perspective to analyse Alice’s PS (*see* Appendix 13 for a full version of Alice’s PS). Specifically, as discussed in section 4.2, where I argued that all the metadiscoursal devices can be seen as a means of communicating with readers and thus, to some extent, engendering the ‘interaction’ with the readers. In light of this point, in my analysis of Alice’s PS, I do not adopt the labels of ‘interactive’ and ‘interactional’,

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instead; rather, I treat the use of ‘metadiscourse’ is multifunctional, which is associated with the writer’s sense of his/her relationship with readers, and the writer’s communicative intention(s) through the mediation of texts.

The following section discusses some of the findings from the metadiscourse analysis on Alice’s PS. Some of the analytical issues that emerged during the analysis stage will also be addressed at the end of this section. For the reader’s convenience, the metadiscoursal resources in Alice’s text are presented in bold form for each example.

Transitions

Examples:

- (1) My research will **also** broaden the boundaries of literacy to incorporate multimedia content.
- (2) **Also**, continuing this research in an academic environment would help me develop research questions that would withstand rigorous scrutiny.
- (3) **In addition to** my Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees, I have taken a graduate class at *Villa University* (pseudonym)...
- (4) **Further**, the emphasis on an interdisciplinary approach ties in well with my background and my research goals.
- (5) I suggest that a lack of gender-based criticism may be due to cognitive dissonance: we are unable to assess this fairly **because** our knowledge frameworks, or schemas, do not allow us to see the bias.
- (6) I believe literacy plays a significant role in our development **because** sources of literacy are sites of social and cultural learning...
- (7) I believe the Reading/Writing/Literacy program is the right place for my research **because** it allows for a broad definition of education...
- (8) The natural progression is a doctoral program, which will grant me access to research facilities and experts **so** I can learn more about quantitative and qualitative analysis...
- (9) My background in economics and mass communication at first glance may not seem a natural fit for a candidate for a doctoral program in education **yet** my research goals and driving curiosity

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very squarely fit under the Reading, Writing and Literacy program at the *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym).

The Examples (1) to (9) can be viewed as ‘transitions’ in Alice’s text. For instance, in Examples (1) to (4), the use of the words/phrases such as ‘also’ and ‘further’ signals ‘addition’ relations between ideas. The metadiscoursal resources (e.g., ‘because’, ‘so’) in Examples (5) to (8) reveal the ‘causal’ relations in arguments. In Example (9), the use of the word ‘yet’ signals the ‘comparison’ relations as it indicates “arguments as different” (Hyland, 2005, p. 50). The use of the word ‘yet’ signals the ‘comparative’ statement concerning the gap between the student’s educational background (‘in economics and mass communication’) and her proposed field of study (‘Reading, Writing and Literacy program’). In fact, the use of ‘yet’ not only functions as organising propositional information but it also reveals the writer’s “sensitivity to the content of the discourse, by making predictions about what the audience is likely to know and how it is likely to respond” (Hyland, 2005, p. 45). In this case, Alice may predict that her readers will identify a gap between her background in ‘economics and mass communication’ and her proposed field of study in ‘Reading, Writing and Literacy’ (Samraj & Monk, 2008, p. 204 – ‘gap in background’). In light of this assumption, she may fear that her readers may be curious about the reasons for this shift in educational interest. Thus, she has explicitly expressed her views on her previous background in ‘economics and mass communication’ (‘may not seem a natural fit for a candidate for a doctoral program in education’) and provided a justification for this ‘gap’ (‘my research goals and driving curiosity very squarely fit under the Reading, Writing and Literacy program at the *University of New Wilson*’).

Frame markers

Examples:

- (10) **My goal is to** take on this challenge and to expand the scholarly understanding of the effects of educational media...
- (11) Ultimately, **my goal is to** elucidate the impact of media upon the learning process, upon our children’s perception of the world...

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- (12) **Ultimately**, my goal is to elucidate the impact of media upon the learning process, upon our children's perception of the world, and upon our understanding of what we feel children should know and experience.
- (13) **Finally**, I hope my research will challenge existing gender paradigms and will help to identify gaps in students' abilities...

The bold text in Examples (10) to (13), at first glance, may be seen as 'frame markers' since they fit perfectly into the metadiscoursal items that have been listed by Hyland (2005, *see* pp. 219-220). However, if we take a closer look at the sentential co-texts, we will find that these words/phrases are different from those that are described by Hyland (2005) in his identification of metadiscoursal resources. More specifically, the words/phrases in these examples do not serve the function of signalling "text boundaries or elements of schematic text structure" (Hyland, 2005, p. 51); rather, they bring out elements that are not "internal to the steps in their arguments" (Hyland, 2005, p. 46). In other words, these words/phrases "connect activities in the world outside the text (external)" (*ibid.* p. 45). For instance, the phrase 'my goal is to', in Examples (10) and (11), reveals the student's objective concerning her proposed research direction (e.g., 'my goal is to take on this challenge', 'my goal is to elucidate the impact of media'). This can be viewed as linked to the information about herself, but not to do with organising propositional information in the text. However, if the phrase 'my goal is to' is in the sentence such as 'in this paper, *my goal is* to investigate different minority students' motivation towards...', it can be considered as a 'frame marker' as it reveals "discourse goals" in the text (Hyland, 2005, p. 51).

Based on this discussion, I would argue that the same words/phrases may function differently when occurring in different sentential co-texts. In Hyland's list of metadiscourse items, these items are mainly identifiable from research articles, dissertations, and textbooks; therefore, phrases such as 'my purpose is', 'lastly', and 'my aim is to', are more likely to function as 'frame markers' that organise arguments in the text. However, in Alice's PS, these phrases may be mainly associated with her determination to pursue her proposed research.

Endophoric markers

Example:

- (14) My desire to pursue an academic career in education is, in part, a response to **the following quote**:

Prospective longitudinal studies and intervention experiments should be undertaken...As a society we are engaged in a vast and uncontrolled experiment with our infants and toddlers, plunging them into home environments that are saturated with electronic media. We should try to understand what we are doing and what are the consequences. p. 519 (Anderson, D. R., Pempek, T. A. (2005). Television and very young children. *American behavioral scientist*, 46, 505-522.)

The bold text in Example (14) can be seen as an ‘endophoric marker’ because it refers to other parts of the text (Hyland, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 2, this type of metadiscoursal resource can be seen as a realisation of the writer’s assumptions about the readers’ expectations. The phrase ‘the following quote’ guides the readers to the forthcoming information in order to assist the “recovery of the writer’s meanings” (Hyland, 2005, p. 51). In fact, the use of the ‘endophoric marker’ in this case is mandatory as it has to be used to guide readers toward the other propositional information that appears in other parts of the text.

Evidentials

Examples:

- (15) My desire to pursue an academic career in education is, in part, a response to the following quote:

Prospective longitudinal studies and intervention experiments should be undertaken...As a society we are engaged in a vast and uncontrolled experiment with our infants and toddlers, plunging them into home environments that are saturated with electronic media. We should try to understand what we are doing and what are the consequences. p. 519 (Anderson, D. R., Pempek, T. A. (2005). Television and very young children. *American behavioral scientist*, 46, 505-522.)

My goal is to take on this challenge and to expand the scholarly understanding of the effects of educational media on preschoolers and young children.

Example (15) shows that a quote by Anderson and Pempek was used by Alice in her PS and this can be seen as an ‘evidential’ marker since it “refer[s] information from other texts” (Hyland, 2005, p. 49). This quotation is used to frame the student’s ‘desire’ to pursue her ‘academic career’ in education as she has explained in the text that her desire to pursue her ‘academic career in education’ is partially ‘a response to the quote’. As such, the use of ‘evidentials’ can be considered as using other researchers’ work in the “cumulative construction of knowledge” (Charles, 2006, p. 326). For instance, the quote in Example (15) is about the ‘electronic media’ and its influence on ‘young children’. The propositional content that follows the quote is concerned with the student’s response to the quote (e.g., ‘my goal is to take on this challenge’, ‘to expand the scholarly understanding’). Alice also stated her anticipated contribution to the field of study.

Also, the use of ‘evidentials’ in this case can be considered as “metalinguistic representations of an idea from another source” (Thomas & Hawes, 1994: 129, cited in Hyland, 2005: 51). In other words, this type of resource helps “guide the reader’s interpretation and establish an authorial command of the subject” (Hyland, 2005, p. 51; Charles, 2006). In Alice’s text, she appears to align herself with the same belief that is proposed by others and this may more or less position the student in the field of ‘literacy’ that matches with the programme that she has applied for (‘Reading, Writing and Literacy programme’). In other words, the connection to the target academic discourse community may be achieved by the use of this quote as it is concerned with early literacy development for children and that this research interest may be relevant to the faculty’s areas of expertise in the target academic community. The use of ‘evidentials’ may also show Alice’s ‘authorial command of the subject’ in that it reveals her knowledge of the field and the relevant literature pertinent to her proposed research topic.

Code glosses

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Examples:

- (16) My Master's research was on the communicative function of children's picture books and looked **specifically** at characteristics that define award-winning books.
- (17) The natural progression is a doctoral program, which will grant me access to research facilities and experts so I can learn more about quantitative and qualitative analysis and **particularly** how to use a mixed methods approach.
- (18) What makes the Reading/Writing/Literacy program stand alone, though, is the focus on literacy, and **particularly** the broader social contexts involved in literacy, the opportunity to do mixed methods research...

The bold text in Examples (16) to (18) can be seen as 'code glosses' as they "supply additional information, by rephrasing, explaining or elaborating what has been said, to ensure the reader is able to recover the writer's intended meaning" (Hyland, 2005, p. 52). The use of these 'code glosses' can be engendered by the student's predictions about the "reader's knowledge-base" (ibid. p. 52). In this case, Alice may feel a need to elaborate more on her propositional information as the reader may know nothing about her background and may want to know more about it. Also, the decision of elaborating what has been stated may be a result of her assumptions about what may be valued in the target academic discourse community. In this sense, the student may attempt to provide enough information to facilitate the readers' understanding about her intended meaning.

Hedges

Examples:

- (19) I **suggest** that a lack of gender-based criticism may be due to cognitive dissonance: we are unable to assess this fairly because our knowledge frameworks, or schemas, do not allow us to see the bias.
- (20) I suggest that a lack of gender-based criticism **may be due to** cognitive dissonance...

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- (21) My background in economics and mass communication at first glance **may not seem** a natural fit for a candidate for a doctoral program in education...
- (22) Ultimately, my goal is to elucidate the impact of media upon the learning process, upon our children's perception of the world, and upon our understanding of what we feel children **should** know and experience.
- (23) Also, continuing this research in an academic environment **would** help me develop research questions that would withstand rigorous scrutiny.
- (24) I would also like to do coursework in other *** programs that **would** allow me to develop my quantitative and qualitative skills...
- (25) If accepted to the program, I **would** approach Deborah Linebarger and The Children's Media Lab at the Annenberg School of Communication.
- (26) I **would** also like to do coursework in other *** programs that would allow me to develop my quantitative and qualitative skills...
- (27) This work **may** give pause to our current understanding of the relationship between television content and social literacy.
- (28) I expect to publish my research on *Sesame Street* and Muppet gender, which **could** challenge existing gender paradigms...

In Alice's text, she used many 'hedges' to "indicate the writer's decision to recognise alternative voices and viewpoints and therefore to withhold complete commitment to a proposition" (Hyland, 2005, p. 52). Specifically, Alice may be concerned about whether or not the readers will share the same view as she has as the readers may have their own views regarding the student's propositions. For instance, in Examples (19) and (20), the 'hedges' (e.g., 'suggest', 'may be due to') were used to strike a balance between commitment to his/her ideas and respect and dialogue with the reader.

In Examples (23) to (28), instead of using phrases like 'will' and 'can', Alice used 'conditional' expressions (e.g., 'would', 'may', 'could') to state the actions that might take place in the future (e.g., 'if accepted to the program, I *would* approach...'). The use of these 'hedges' indicates the student's "[calculating] what weight to give to an assertion, considering the degree of precision or reliability that

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[she wants] it to carry and perhaps claiming protection in the event of its eventual overthrow” (Hyland, 1998, cited in Hyland, 2005, p. 52). In this case, Alice may be unsure of whether she would be accepted onto the course so she could only envision what might happen if she were to gain a place to study in her proposed field. Thus, the ‘hedges’ were used to express what may or may not happen in the future.

Boosters

Examples:

- (29) **I believe** literacy plays a significant role in our development because sources of literacy are sites of social and cultural learning, and I believe our earliest experiences shape this literacy.
- (30) ... **I believe** our earliest experiences shape this literacy.
- (31) **I believe** the Reading/Writing/Literacy program is the right place for my research because it allows for a broad definition of education...

In Examples (29) to (31), the phrase ‘I believe’ was used as ‘boosters’ to express certainty in the student’s propositions. These metadiscoursal markers “construct rapport by marking involvement with the topic and solidarity with an audience” (Hyland, 2005, p. 53). In Examples (29) and (30), Alice used ‘I believe’ to bring out her views on ‘literacy’. The use of this ‘booster’ can be seen as a reflection of the student’s assumptions about the readers’ expectations. More specifically, Alice may predict that the readers may share the similar views as she does concerning the issue of ‘literacy’. In light of this, the use of ‘I believe’ “strengthens an argument by emphasising the mutual experiences needed to draw the same conclusions as the writer” (ibid. p. 53). One point to note here is that the phrase ‘I believe’ in Examples (29) to (31) can also function as ‘attitude markers’. I will explain this in the next section.

Attitude markers

Examples:

- (32) **I believe** literacy plays a significant role in our development because sources of literacy...

- (33) ... **I believe** our earliest experiences shape this literacy.
- (34) **I believe** the Reading/Writing/Literacy program is the right place for my research because it allows for a broad definition of education...
- (35) Finally, **I hope** my research will challenge existing gender paradigms and will help to identify gaps...
- (36) Very broadly, **I wish** to answer the question, “What early experiences shape our future behavior and worldview?”
- (37) I suggest that a lack of gender-based criticism may be due to cognitive dissonance: we are unable to assess this **fairly** because our knowledge frameworks, or schemas, do not allow us to see the bias.

The phrases in Examples (32) to (37) can be seen as ‘attitude markers’ as they are indicating “the writer’s affective attitude to propositions” (Hyland, 2005, p. 53). In Examples (32) to (34), the phrase ‘I believe’ is used as a ‘booster’ to reveal the student’s certainty regarding the claims she has made. At the same time, it also reveals her attitudes towards her proposed information. The phrase ‘I believe’ conveys Alice’s agreement and emphasis on propositions. In Examples (35) and (36), the phrases ‘I hope’ and ‘I wish’, reveal the student’s ‘affective’ attitude to propositions as these phrases draw attention to her desire for something to happen or to be true (e.g., ‘*I hope* my research will challenge existing gender paradigms’, ‘*I wish* to answer the question’). In Example (37), the word ‘fairly’ conveys the student’s attitudes toward the propositions of ‘gender biases’.

Self-mentions

Examples:

- (38) **My** desire to pursue an academic career in education is, in part, a response to the following quote...
- (39) **My** goal is to take on this challenge and to expand the scholarly understanding of the effects of educational media on preschoolers and young children.
- (40) For the last three years **I** have been working on a content analysis of Muppet gender on *Sesame Street*...
- (41) The natural progression is a doctoral program, which will grant **me** access to research facilities...

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The ‘self-mention’ marker is the most frequently used metadiscoursal resource that I have identified from Alice’s text. As discussed in Chapter 2, the use of ‘self-mentions’ helps “control the level of personality in a text” (Hyland, 2005, p. 52). In this case, the student used many ‘self-mentions’ (e.g., ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’) that convey her strong sense of ‘authorial stance’ towards the propositions.

Engagement markers

Examples:

- (42) Ultimately, my goal is to elucidate the impact of media upon the learning process, upon **our** children’s perception of the world, and upon **our** understanding of what we feel children should know and experience.
- (43) Very broadly, I wish to answer the question, “What early experiences shape **our** future behavior and worldview?”
- (44) I believe literacy plays a significant role in **our** development because sources of literacy are sites of social and cultural learning, and I believe **our** earliest experiences shape this literacy.
- (45) This work may give pause to **our** current understanding of the relationship between television content and social literacy.
- (46) The outcome of this research will be a better understanding of how literacy is a social construction and that literacy begins long before **we** are able to read or write.
- (47) I suggest that a lack of gender-based criticism may be due to cognitive dissonance: we are unable to assess this fairly because our knowledge frameworks, or schemas, do not allow **us** to see the bias.

It is interesting to note that Alice used many ‘engagement markers’ that “explicitly address readers, either to focus their attention or include them as discourse participants” (Hyland, 2005, p. 53). As we can see from Examples (42) to (47), Alice has repeatedly used the terms ‘our’, ‘we’, and ‘us’, when referring to her views on ‘literacy’ and its influence on human beings (e.g., ‘our children’s perception of the world’, ‘our [adults in general] future behavior and worldview’). The use of ‘engagement markers’ in this case may be associated with her predictions about meeting “readers’ expectations of inclusion and disciplinary solidarity, addressing them as participants in an argument” (Hyland, 2005, p. 54). For instance, in Example

(42), she used the word ‘our’ in phrases such as ‘*our* children’s perception of the world’ and ‘*our* understanding of what we feel children should know and experience’. The use of the word ‘our’ here reveals the student’s awareness of the readers as academics who are surely adult and may have children of their own. In this case, it can be said that the use of ‘engagement markers’ may be enacted by the student’s “degree of knowledge of what to make explicit in [her] text and of what to take for granted” (Hempel & Degand, 2008, p. 678).

Alice has also expressed the importance of conducting research on literacy and the ‘impact of [the] media’ on its development for human beings, and children in particular. She appears to use the ‘engagement markers’ to reveal her ‘research contribution’ would not restrict to her and that it would help all kinds of people, in general. It would be a different story if the student used ‘self-mention’ markers, such as ‘my’ and ‘I’ instead of ‘our and we’, in the phrases of ‘*our* [my] children’s perception of the world’ and ‘*our* [my] understanding of what *we* [I] feel children should know and experience’; these phrases would simply refer back to the student as a writer without explicitly engaging the readers in her argument regarding the issue of children’s learning process.

4.4 Analytical discussions from the analysis of Alice’s Personal Statement

Based upon the discussion in section 4.3, I have found that the category of ‘frame markers’ is not identified in Alice’s text. As the words/phrases (e.g., ‘my goal is to’, ‘finally’) that I have identified in Alice’s text do not fit in with Hyland’s definition of ‘frame markers’, I would like to address these words/phrases as more content-oriented discourse markers which can be distinguished from Hyland’s ‘frame markers’, which mainly perform the function of signalling text structure. As I have indicated earlier, the less frequent use of ‘frame marker’ in the PS may be associated with the feature of the PS. Specifically, the length of a PS is shorter and the purpose of writing this type of essay is rather specific because it usually consists of requisite information about the students’ background and what has motivated them to pursue their proposed degree course. In light of this point, the selection of content for the PS is more or less expected by students and academics. As such, the use of words/phrases, such as ‘my goal is to’, ‘ultimately’, and ‘finally’, are likely to be

associated with propositional content that refers to aspects ‘outside’ the text rather than signalling the text structure in texts. The case would be different if the content were research articles or dissertations in which the maximum number of words allowed is usually far more than the quantity permitted for the PSs. Also, research articles and dissertations are usually broken down into several different sections (e.g., methodology, literature reviews, and findings). For this reason, it can be argued that the ‘frame markers’ are logically employed by the writer in their articles and dissertations to act as signposts for the readers as to ‘where they are’ or ‘where to go to’ in the texts (Hyland, 2005; Hempel & Degand, 2008; Abdi, Rizi, & Tavakoli, 2010).

4.5 Comparisons between Anna’s and Alice’s Personal Statement

Based on the findings derived from the textual analysis in this chapter, the metadiscoursal resources are identified in Anna’s and Alice’s texts (*see* Tables 4.1 and 4.2 attached at the end of this chapter where I have summarised the metadiscoursal resources identified from both texts). Generally speaking, the ‘transition’ markers (e.g., ‘but’, ‘because’, ‘also’) are commonly used by both students to manage the information flow that guides the reader through the texts. Additionally, a high frequency of the use of ‘self-mention’ markers can be found in both essays to explicitly state the authorial presence in the texts (Hyland, 2005). This phenomenon may be associated with the prominent feature of the PS that this is the type of text that invites students to express their own rationale for the pursuit of the degree and supported by their relevant experiences. For instance, as demonstrated in both Anna’s and Alice’s texts, ‘self-mention’ markers such as ‘I’, ‘my’, and ‘me’ are used frequently to bring out their motivation (e.g., ‘*my* goal is to’), state their previous experiences (e.g., ‘*I* have been working on’), and express their thoughts concerning the potential benefit they stand to gain if they get accepted into the course of study (e.g., ‘the natural progression is a doctoral programme, which will grant *me* access to research facilities’).

Additionally, I would argue that the use of the phrase, ‘the following quote’, in Alice’s case is compulsory whereas Anna’s use of ‘endophoric markers’, such as ‘see Appendix 1’, and ‘see Appendix 2’ (section 4.1; Examples 12-14), may not be

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seen as mandatory as compared with its usage in Example (14) in section 4.3. The ‘endophoric markers’ in Anna’s case function as a way of helping facilitate readers’ comprehension of the propositional content (*see* discussion in section 4.1). The surface meaning of the sentence may not be influenced even if these ‘endophoric markers’ were not used, as these markers offer additional information to “[facilitate] comprehension and supporting arguments” (Hyland, 2005, p. 51). However, the ‘endophoric marker’ (‘the following quote’) in Alice’s text is essential as, without it, the sentence in Example (14) in section 4.3 remains incomplete and may lead to a breakdown in communication.

Here, it is also interesting to see that although ‘engagement markers’ are found in the texts of both Anna and Alice, it is important to note that the ways in which they have used ‘engagement markers’ are different. As I have discussed in section 4.1 (Examples 38-39), Anna used these markers to refer directly to the readers who will read her essay and then assess her suitability for the proposed study based upon reading her text (e.g., ‘if *you* decide to accept my application’), whereas Alice conversely adopted them in the context where she expressed her views towards a particular issue that outlined her perspective as to why it was worth pursuing as a PhD topic. Specifically, she talked about the importance of sources of literacy that can influence the development of human beings/children, thereby demonstrating the need to conduct research on literacy and its impact on young children in particular (e.g., ‘my goal is to elucidate the impact of media upon the learning process, upon *our* children’s perception of the world’; *see* the discussion in section 4.3). Based on this discussion, it can be said that the metadiscoursal resources in the same category (in this case, ‘engagement maker’) can be used to achieve different propositional content and communicative purposes.

4.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have made use of Hyland’s metadiscoursal linguistic devices to analyse two students’ PSs for their PhD applications. My findings have suggested that the metadiscoursal resources have been used in both texts to achieve different propositional content and writer-intended meaning. Through my examination of the analytical process I have found that rather than categorising the metadiscoursal

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resources based upon the distinctions between ‘interactive’ and ‘interactional’ dimensions, both metadiscoursal resources can be regarded as a means of achieving interaction between the writers and readers (Hyland, 2005). This chapter has mainly focused on the students’ written texts, which provide a useful starting point for my further investigation on issues of writer identity that I will discuss in the next chapter. Chapter 5 will further examine Anna’s cases, with reference to her interviews, which provide an insight into her assumptions about the PS and relevant writing practices. I will also address the ‘meta’ aspect of the metadiscourse analysis that emphasises writer’s attitudes and assumptions towards both the content and the audience of the PSs.

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Table 4.1 Metadiscourse in Anna's Personal statement to the UK-based institution

Paragraphs of Anna's text/ Metadiscourse resources	Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3	Paragraph 4	Paragraph 5	Paragraph 6	Paragraph 7	Paragraph 8	Total occurrence of each resource
Transitions	None	'besides'	'but', 'because', 'additionally', ' <u>worth mentioning, too</u> '	'also', 'additionally'	' <u>noteworthy</u> ', 'however', 'on the other hand', 'but', 'consequently', 'and'	' <u>but most important of all</u> ', 'however', 'also'	' <u>what is worth mentioning, too</u> ', 'as', 'also', 'additionally', 'moreover', 'because', ' <u>the fact that</u> '	None	22
Frame markers	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	'lastly'	1
Endophoric markers	None	'see Appendix 1'	'see Appendix 2'	'see Appendix 3'	'see Appendix 4'	None	'see Appendix 5'	None	5
Evidentials	Socrates' quotation	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	1
Code glosses	None	'specifically'	None	'specifically'	'specifically'	None	None	None	3
Hedges	None	None	None	None	'should not be considered'	'would'	None	'would'	4
Boosters	' <u>any better way</u> '	None	None	None	None	' <u>but most important of all</u> ', 'I strongly believe'	' <u>I believe</u> ', ' <u>the fact that</u> '	None	5
Attitude markers	' <u>any better way</u> '	None	' <u>worth mentioning, too</u> '	None	' <u>noteworthy</u> ' (<i>deserving attention because important or interesting</i>)	' <u>but most important of all</u> ', 'I strongly believe'	' <u>I believe</u> ', ' <u>what is worth mentioning, too</u> '	None	7
Self-mentions	'I', 'my'	'I', 'my'	'I', 'my'	'I', 'my'	'my', 'I', 'me'	'I', 'me', 'my'	'I', 'my', 'me'	'I', 'my'	75
Engagement markers	None	None	None	None	None	'you'	None	'your', 'you'	3

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Table 4.2 Metadiscourse in Alice's Personal statement to the US-based institution

Paragraphs of Alice's text/ Metadiscourse resources	Paragraph 1	Paragraph 2	Paragraph 3	Paragraph 4	Paragraph 5	Paragraph 6	Paragraph 7	Total occurrence of each resource
Transitions	'and', 'also'	'and', 'because'	'and', 'because'	'in addition to', 'and', 'so', 'also'	'and', 'yet', 'because', 'further', 'also'	'and'	'and'	20
Frame markers	None	None	None	None	None	None	None	0
Endophoric markers	'the following quote'	None	None	None	None	None	None	1
Evidentials	'Evidentials'	None	None	None	None	None	None	1
Code glosses	None	None	'specifically'	'particularly'	None	'particularly'	None	3
Hedges	None	'suggest', 'may be due to'	None	'would'	'may not seem', 'would'	None	'could', 'may', 'should'	11
Boosters	None	None	<u>'I believe'</u>	None	<u>'I believe'</u>	None	None	3
Attitude markers	'I hope'	'fairly'	<u>'I wish', 'I believe'</u>	None	<u>'I believe'</u>	None	None	6
Self-mentions	'my', 'I'	'I'	'my'	'my', 'I', 'me'	'my', 'I', 'me'	None	'I', 'my'	32
Engagement markers	'we'	'our', 'we', 'us'	'our'	None	None	None	'our', 'we'	12

Chapter 5 – A case study of the student's identity in the Personal Statement

In Chapter 4, I discussed how metadiscoursal resources were used in two students' PSs (Anna and Alice). In this chapter, I aim to examine the 'meta' aspect of the metadiscourse analysis with particular emphasis on the exploration of the potential link between the uses of the metadiscoursal resources and their relation to writer identity and self-representation in the student's writing. This is significant since 'metadiscourse' embodies "the idea that communication is more than just the exchange of information [...] but also involves the personalities, attitudes and assumptions of those who are communicating" (Hyland, 2005, p. 3). In light of this, it can be argued that the use of metadiscoursal resources by students can be associated with their sense of presenting themselves to convince the readers through the mediation of their PSs. Here, I have argued that metadiscourse can be understood as a textual level realisation of writer identity and self-representation as "writing is an act of identity in which writers align themselves with interests, values, beliefs, practices and power relations through their discourse choices" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 109).

To explore writer identity and self-representation and its relation to metadiscourse in writing, I examine Anna's PS as a 'telling case' (Mitchell, 1984) to highlight the issues of writer identity that arise during the process of writing. Specifically, Anna was highly aware of the importance of presenting herself in her PS for her doctoral application in the UK. Chapter 4 has discussed Anna's uses of metadiscoursal resources and this current chapter will follow this up with reference to Anna's interview data concerning her own comments on her PS and her accounts of the PS writing process. In order to examine the issues of writer identity in writing, I draw on the theoretical perspectives previously outlined in Chapter 2, with a particular reference to Ivanič's (1998) accounts of the three interrelated aspects of writer identity in academic writing. Table 5.1 below summarises these aspects (*see* Chapter 2 for a detailed outline):

Table 5.1 Three aspects of writer identity (Ivanič, 1998: 23-29)

Aspects of self/writer identity

Autobiographical self

This aspect of identity is associated with “a writer’s sense of their roots, of where they are coming from, and that this identity they bring with them to writing is itself socially constructed and constantly changing as a consequence of their developing life-history” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 24).

Discoursal self

This aspect of identity is “constructed through the discourse characteristics of a text, which relate to values, beliefs and power relations in the social context in which they were written” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 25).

Self as author

This aspect of identity is concerned with the extent to which writers claim “authority as the source of the content of the text, and in how far they establish an authorial presence in their writing” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 26).

In this chapter, I have drawn upon the three aspects of writer identity amongst four, as outlined in Chapter 2, as they appear particularly helpful in the exploration of writer identities constructed by the student. I concentrate on Ivanič’s (1998) way of thinking in relation to the identity of the writer in the act of writing and also draw upon the other perspectives outlined in Chapter 2 wherever they seem relevant. In this chapter, I will discuss some of the examples of metadiscourse that I identified in Anna’s PS in Chapter 4 in conjunction with Anna’s interview. It should be noted that as this discussion is based on a single student case study, the findings in this chapter may not be generalised and applied to the other cases of metadiscoursal resources and their connection to writer identity and self-representation. However, the discussions can be seen as a work in progress to which the analysis of different writers’ metadiscourse can come up with other potential links between the use of metadiscourse and their connection to the relevant writer identity according to the needs of the context.

5.1 Anna’s identity and self-representation in her Personal Statement

Table 5.2 below summarises the metadiscoursal resources that I have identified in Chapter 4:

Table 5.2 Metadiscoursal resources in Anna's Personal statement

Metadiscoursal resources	Function	Linguistic realisations
Transitions	Express relations between main clauses	'besides', 'but', 'because', 'additionally', 'worth mentioning, too', 'also', 'noteworthy', 'however', 'as', 'consequently', 'but most important of all'
Frame markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	'lastly'
Endophoric markers	Refer to information in other parts of the text	'see Appendix 1', 'see Appendix 2', 'see Appendix 3', 'see Appendix 4', 'see Appendix 5'
Evidentials	Refer to information from other texts	'a quotation by Socrates'
Code glosses	Elaborate propositional meaning	'specifically'
Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue	'should not be considered'. 'would'
Boosters	Emphasise certainty and close dialogue	'any better way', 'but most important of all', 'I strongly believe', 'the fact that', 'I believe'
Attitude markers	Expresses writers' attitude to proposition	'any better way', 'worth mentioning, too', 'noteworthy', 'but most important of all', 'I strongly believe', 'I believe', 'what is worth mentioning, too'
Self-mentions	Explicit reference to author(s)	'my', 'I', 'me'
Engagement markers	Explicitly build relationship with reader	'you', 'your'

Amongst these metadiscoursal resources as shown in Table 5.2, six metadiscoursal resources – 'self-mentions', 'hedges', 'boosters', 'attitude markers', 'engagement markers' and 'endophoric markers' – identified from Anna's PS have been chosen for the discussion of the exploration of the possible relationship between the uses of the metadiscoursal resources and their relation to writer identities. I decided to only concentrate on these specific metadiscoursal categories for this discussion as opposed to all of the categories for several reasons: firstly, I have argued that not every metadiscoursal resource carries exactly the same weight. For instance, as I have discussed in Chapter 4, the boosters such as 'what is worth mentioning too' and 'noteworthy' in Anna's PS may carry more weight in terms of the writer's intended meaning than the transition markers identified such as 'besides' and 'additionally' in the sense that the former performs the function of "emphasising the force of propositions" whilst the latter serves as the conjunction to link the propositions

(Hyland, 2005, p. 52). Secondly, the six metadiscoursal resources that I choose for discussion here seems to provide a valid connection between the student's use of metadiscourse and the identity that she brings to the act of writing. Specifically, the connection between these selected metadiscoursal resources and Anna's accounts concerning her writing practices in the interviews seems to provide good examples in highlighting the aspects of writer identity that she brings to the act of writing and demonstrating the idea that context is a vital component in deciding the choices of metadiscoursal resources to help her communicate her ideas.

5.1.1 Self-mentions and writer identity

Based on the discussion in Chapter 4, the use of 'self-mention' markers has been by far the most frequent device used in Anna's PS. The recurrent use of 'self-mention' markers demonstrates the high degree of "explicit author presence" in the text (Hyland, 2005, p. 53). From a 'meta'discourse perspective, the 'self-mention' markers can be viewed as the most powerful means of writer self-representation (Ivanič, 1998). The student in this case study uses many first-person pronouns (e.g., 'I', 'me') and possessive adjectives (e.g., 'my') that reveal her strong sense of 'authorship' in relation to the writer's position, opinions, and values towards the content selection and readers of the text in the target discourse community. In fact, during the interview with Anna, she strongly emphasised the fact that she wanted to make her PS more about herself and more about her voice. In this case, Anna's strong sense of presenting herself in writing can be associated with the aspect of 'self as author' as Anna sees herself, to a large extent, as an author and presents herself accordingly as an author (Ivanič, 1998). The aspect of Anna's 'self as author' was highlighted in the interview when Anna commented on the opening paragraph of her PS:

Anna's PS

Excerpt 5.1

I cannot find any better way to start this statement than with a quotation by Socrates: 'the only thing I know is that I know nothing' (εν οίδα ότι ουδέν οίδα). His words nicely express **my** profound beliefs on spiritual cultivation and **my** desire for expanding **my** knowledge continuously and persistently.

Anna's interview

Excerpt 5.2

... what I am trying to show from this statement is my personality, not only my qualifications but also my personality that I am a person who wants to learn continuously... what I am trying to say here is that in all my life, from the first paragraph which is my introduction I try to say that for my whole life, I try to learn and learn. I have never felt satisfied with my knowledge.

In Excerpt 5.2, Anna expresses that she wants to show her personality as that of a person who has a strong desire for knowledge and learning. In light of this, it can be said that the use of 'self-mention' markers in Anna's PS can be interpreted as being engendered by the student's 'self as author'. In other words, her self-consciousness about 'authorship' is exposed explicitly by her use of 'self-mentions' to express her beliefs about the importance of revealing one's 'personality' in the PS. Further, as discussed in Chapter 2, this aspect of 'self as author' can also be to "a considerable extent, a product of a writer's autobiographical self" (Ivanič, 1998, p. 26). The aspect of 'autobiographical self' was also noted by Anna when she expressed the reason she valued education and learning, and wanted to portray her identity as a person with a strong desire to continually gain knowledge.

Anna's interview

Excerpt 5.3

... this is something important for me as a person, that my parents are refugees... but they tried to give me the opportunity to be here... they started from having nothing and we're not rich... but we are okay... and this is what I'm trying to say that from nothing my parents made me the person that I am, that I don't give a lot of importance in money and that the important thing for me is my education... I'm a person who wants to learn; who believes that education and knowledge is the most important thing.

In Anna's accounts above, she mentions things about her family background (e.g., 'my parents are refugees', 'my parents made me the person that I am') and implies that this is what has shaped and cultivated her into the person that she is, specifically a person who values education and learning. This is associated with her

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‘autobiographical self’ that is related to her previous “social and discursal history” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 24), an aspect that the student brings to the act of writing. In fact, most of the content in Anna’s PS focuses on herself, including details of her educational background, research experiences, teaching experiences, reasons for choosing the programme, and other personal information. This can be interpreted as the reason for the frequent use of ‘self-mention’ markers in her PS. Apart from the aspects of ‘self as author’ and ‘autobiographical self’, the repeated use of ‘self-mentions’ in Anna’s PS can also be engendered by the ‘discursal self’ in the sense that the “discourse characteristics of a text” may consciously or unconsciously constrain the way in which the writer conveys herself in a particular piece of writing (Ivanič, 1998, p. 25). The aspect of ‘discursal self’ was noted by Anna in the interview:

Anna’s interview

Excerpt 5.4

I did something which they [academics] expect me to do. For instance, education, module, research experiences, teaching experiences, and some other things.

From Anna’s interview, it is clear that she seems to be aware of the readers’ expectations regarding the content. In this case, the PS is supposed to provide a space for applicants to reveal personal information about themselves and their motivations for the proposed field of study. Aligning with this particular feature of the PS, Anna was likely to select some personal information that would conform to the feature of the text (PS in this case), its context, and the target community and readers. Since the source of the content is mainly associated with the student herself, the use of ‘self-mentions’ becomes the most apparent and frequent device used in her PS.

5.1.2 Hedges and writer identity

As discussed in Chapter 2, the use of ‘hedges’ indicates the writer’s decision to acknowledge “alternative voices and viewpoints and so withhold complete commitment to a proposition” (Hyland, 2005, p. 52). From a ‘meta’discourse perspective, this can be interpreted as the writer’s awareness of the apparent ‘relative

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status’ of the readers in the sense that there may be an imbalance of knowledge and consequent dividing line between the views of the student applicants and the academics who will evaluate the PSs. For instance, Anna used ‘should not be considered’ rather than ‘must not be considered’ in the sentence below:

Anna’s PS

Excerpt 5.5

On the other hand, I have learned through this experience that the multilingual composition of modern societies **should not be considered** as a disadvantage and a weakness but as a creative and renewing source.

The use of the ‘hedge’ expression (‘should not be considered’) in this case can be interpreted as Anna’s assumptions about the readers’ expectations regarding the content. Because of the uncertainty of the readers’ ‘knowledge-base’, Anna possibly feared that the potential readers may disagree with what she said in her statement and hence the ‘hedge’ marker was used in her statement to reveal the openness for negotiation in the propositional information. The student’s awareness of the potential readers was highlighted in the interview:

Anna’s interview

Excerpt 5.6

... but the most important thing is that I wouldn’t know if... what is the perception of teaching of the person who was going to read my statement, for instance John [Anna’s supervisor; this is a pseudonym]. I don’t believe that [he] was going to agree with that... with this strong statement, so this is why I changed it... as a person I’m trying not to make so strong statements in general... less strong statements...

Although Anna’s account above does not directly address the sentence in Excerpt 5.5 where the metadiscoursal resource ‘should not be considered’ occurs, it seems that she was conscious about the perceptions of the potential readers of the propositional content of her PS. She was concerned that potential readers may disagree with what she said in her essay and hence used an ‘advisable’ commentary (‘should not be considered’) in relation to her previous experience. In light of this, Anna’s use of the ‘hedge’ marker in this case can be associated with the aspects of ‘discoursal self’ in

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the sense that it is constructed through the “discourse characteristics of a text” that relate to “power relations in the social context in which they were written” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 25). In this context, the power relation occurs between the student and potential readers as assessors in admissions context. The sentence in Excerpt 5.5 would come across differently if ‘should not be considered’ was replaced by ‘must not be considered’, which expresses certainty and a strong recommendation for the proposition.

The use of ‘hedge’ markers in this case can be also associated with the aspect of ‘self as author’ as Anna may view herself as an author who will take full responsibility for her statement. She may fear that the readers might not share the same view towards what she stated and thus, instead of closing down any alternative voices from the readers, the use of a ‘hedge’ marker in this case helps the student to avoid any unnecessary or indirect confrontation with her readers. Since the sentence in Excerpt 5.5 is drawn from Anna’s prior teaching experiences, it can be said that Anna is bringing her ‘autobiographical self’ to the act of writing. This aspect of writer identity was also noted by Anna in the interview:

Anna’s interview

Excerpt 5.7

... I’m trying to take a safe position and say something. For instance when I’m taking the position of a primary school teacher, Greek primary school teacher, and I’m saying something, this is a safe position for me and I’m not saying something very strong.

In Anna’s account above, she reveals her position in relation to her views of teaching where she is trying to ‘take a safe position’ as she wrote her PS. She gave an example of her role as a ‘Greek primary school teacher’ and explains that within this position she tends to take the soft approach of expressing things and does not say anything very strong. In light of this point, it can be said that the student’s use of ‘hedge’ (e.g., ‘should not be considered’) is engendered by her ‘autobiographical self’ in the sense that the student’s previous experiences (being a ‘primary school teacher’) may have led her to write in the way that she now does (Ivanič, 1998).

5.1.3 Boosters and attitude markers, and writer identity

In Chapter 4, I found that many of the metadiscoursal resources that were used in Anna's PS can function as both boosters and attitude markers; therefore I will discuss these two metadiscoursal categories jointly. As discussed in Chapter 2, the use of 'boosters' serves to close down alternative views and signals the writer's certainty in what he or she is saying. The use of 'attitude markers' indicates the writer's opinion or assessment of a proposition (Hyland, 2005). For instance, Anna used 'I believe' in the sentence as shown below:

Anna's PS

Excerpt 5.8

What is worth mentioning, too, is that, since **I believe** that education cannot be achieved only through books, I was involved in a number of extra activities. These activities have added colour and meaning in my life but also contributed in enriching my cultural world. [...] These activities have offered me skills that primary school teachers in Greek Cypriot education need to have as they are expected to teach all the different curriculum subjects and they have also promoted my whole sided education.

In Excerpt 5.8, the use of 'I believe' in the first sentence as a booster and attitude marker brings out Anna's strong beliefs as to what she considers to be the acquisition of education, and why she values 'activities' such as 'playing the piano' and 'doing art' as being part of the academic domain (*see* Appendix 11: paragraph 7 in Anna's PS). In the interview, Anna commented on her choice of including these activities in her PS:

Anna's interview

Excerpt 5.9

...what I'm going to say in this paragraph is to speak about some extra activities beyond my education which I believe are very important for me to be the person who I am now.... This is important for me as a person... I found it is very valuable because it shows my personality and my character.

Anna's comments in Excerpt 5.9 suggest that the use of boosters and attitude markers ('I believe') may be engendered by Anna's 'autobiographical self' and that

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her strong beliefs towards her propositional information are associated with her prior “social and discursal history” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 24). Specifically, Anna stressed the importance of the many activities she previously undertook because these activities combined with all her other experiences have influenced her to become the person she is at present. Additionally, the use of ‘I believe’ in this case can also be engendered by Anna’s ‘discursal self’, which is related to her assumptions about the readers’ expectations and how she wishes to come across. In this case, Anna was keen to show her personality by providing examples of the extra activities she engaged in previously. She considered the examples she highlighted in her PS as being appealing or important to the readers and the target community and anticipated these would lead to establishing a rapport with the readers. This aspect of ‘discursal self’ was noted by Anna in the interview:

Anna’s interview

Excerpt 5.10

They [academics] think it is also very important to try to show them your personality, not just, I did that, I did that. So, that’s the reason why I included some of my activities beyond education.

Anna’s accounts in Excerpt 5.10 explicitly convey her awareness of the self and her readers. Based on the discussions above, it can be said that the use of ‘boosters’ and ‘attitude markers’ (‘I believe’) can be regarded as a consequence of Anna’s assessment of the readers’ expectations and her awareness of the relationship with the readers. In other words, the use of ‘I believe’ indicates the student’s assumptions about what may be valued by the target audience and by the readers. In this case, the use of ‘boosters’ and ‘attitude markers’ can also be seen as a realisation of Anna’s ‘self as author’ in the sense that Anna shows a greater sense of “authority as the source of the content of the text” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 26).

5.1.4 Engagement markers and writer identity

As discussed in Chapter 2, the use of ‘engagement markers’ serves to explicitly address readers and draw them into the discourse (Hyland, 2005). From a ‘meta’discourse perspective, the use of this type of metadiscoursal resource can be understood as the writer’s awareness of the readers. In Anna’s text, second person

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pronouns such as ‘you’ and ‘your’ were used to refer to the academic readers who would assess her PS. For instance, in the final paragraph of her PS, Anna expressed her wish to study the proposed programme at that particular institution (‘being able to study a research programme at *your* university’, ‘if *you* decide to accept my application’). This serves to reveal her authorial presence in the text in the sense that Anna demonstrates her awareness of the relationship with her readers as the gatekeepers in the admissions process. However, it is interesting to note that although in general Anna sees herself to a large extent as the author of the content in her PS, the last paragraph (where the ‘engagement markers’ were used) seems to be somewhat detached (*or* suppressed) from her sense of ‘self as author’. This phenomenon was highlighted in her interview when she commented on the final paragraph of her PS:

Anna’s PS (final paragraph)

Excerpt 5.11

Lastly, I am very looking forward to the prospect of doing a research degree at *University of Lefka* (pseudonym), a university renowned for the excellence of its teaching and the calibre of its graduates. Being able to study a research programme at **your** University and learn from specialised professors and leading principles in my subject area would fulfil my goals towards achieving my ideal professional study. Therefore, if **you** decide to accept my application it would be a great opportunity which I am prepared to take full advantage of.

Anna’s interview

Excerpt 5.12

This is not a lot about me but lots of students use this...to praise academics. This is what I chose to end up my Personal statement with this paragraph. This is something I put later because lots of students use this.

In Excerpt 5.12, Anna stated that she felt the final paragraph in her PS did not represent her very well (‘not a lot about me’) but she still included it in her text. She admitted that she conformed to the conventional method of concluding a PS commonly done by many students: by expressing their desire to study the proposed field of study at that particular institution and complimenting the readers and the institution where the readers are based (e.g., ‘a university renowned for the

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excellence of its teaching and the calibre of its graduates'). In light of this point, the use of the 'engagement marker' ('you', 'your') in Anna's final paragraph may be due to her understandings of this type of text through "[her] knowledge of texts [she has] encountered in similar settings in the past, either as [a] reader or [a] writer, and by relying on readers' abilities to similarly recognise intertextuality, or resemblances, between texts" (Hyland, 2005, p. 12). In other words, the use of 'engagement markers' may be associated with the student's 'autobiographical self' as Anna's prior reading and writing experiences of the PS may have led her to write in the way she did (Ivanič, 1998, p. 24-25).

Furthermore, the use of 'engagement markers' in Excerpt 5.12 may be engendered by Anna's 'discoursal self' as the discourse features of the PS writing may shape her voice in terms of the way she wishes to sound and such a voice may not be necessarily tied to the individuals (Matsuda, 2001). Specifically, despite the fact that Anna felt the statement about the 'praising' was not a genuine self-reflection, she felt obliged to include it as such a statement, from her perspective, seems to be a norm to conclude a PS. In fact, some other students in my study also expressed they would include statements in their PSs which may not directly relate to them but merely for the purpose of meeting the expectation of readers.

5.1.5 Endophoric markers and writer identity

As discussed in Chapter 2, the use of 'endophoric markers' such as 'see Appendix 1' and 'see Appendix 2' in Anna's text perform the function of making additional information available to the readers. For instance, Anna used 'see Appendix 1' when she mentioned her 'academic performance' during her school years and 'see Appendix 2' when she talked about her education as an undergraduate:

Anna's PS

Excerpt 5.13

During my school years, I learned that nothing is accomplished without hard work, persistence and sacrifices. Specifically, I tried very hard and achieved excellent results for my academic performance in all subjects (see **Appendix 1**).

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Anna's PS

Excerpt 5.14

After graduation, I took the highly competitive university entry exams and obtained a place in the Department of Primary School Education at the *University of Lefka* (pseudonym). My university education was intense and demanding but simultaneously fulfilling and stimulating (see **Appendix 2** – detailed transcript of my undergraduate courses).

In both of these cases, Anna supplied the readers with her high school and undergraduate transcripts attached as appendices to support her argument. From the 'meta'discourse perspective, this may be because of the student's predictions about "the extent to which specific topical knowledge is shared" (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, pp. 207-211). More specifically, the student may feel a need to provide additional information to help facilitate readers' comprehension of the propositional content as the writer and readers may not share the same knowledge base. In fact, Anna's use of 'endophoric markers' is closely associated with aspects of 'autobiographical self', 'discoursal self' and 'self as author'. These aspects of writer identity were noted by Anna during the interview when I asked her to provide an account regarding her great emphasis on her excellent achievements of her academic performance in her PS:

Anna's interview

Excerpt 5.15

... the University of Lefka (pseudonym) was the only university in Cyprus. And I want to highlight that I am not coming from the college in my country. I am coming from the University of Lefka. And it was really hard for me to gain the place in the University of Lefka. The school of education...let's say...because only the very very good students can get into. Lots of people want to become the teachers in Cyprus because it is a good pay job. So I just tried to emphasise here that I was a very good student in school. I am an excellent student in school. And I tried very hard to gain a place in the University of Lefka which is highly privileged in Cyprus. And I also tried to say here.... We felt a little but uncomfortable when we tried so hard to get into the University of Lefka and tried so hard to take the BA. Whereas some other students who are not excellent students in school went to the colleges in Cyprus and then became the teachers more easily....maybe

that's why I emphasised so much the excellent in my school years, the University of Lefka, the highly competitive university entrance exam.

In Excerpt 5.15, Anna stated the reasons why she placed particular emphasis on her school and university education. She outlined the convoluted process of taking the highly competitive university entrance exams, which only allowed superb students to gain a place in the *University of Lefka* (pseudonym). This background information reveals the reason Anna places such a high value on her academic performance during her school and university career. Her account brings out a large part of her 'autobiographical self' that is associated with her 'sense of roots' and 'where she is coming from' (Ivanič, 1998). Based on this discussion, it can be said that the use of 'endophoric markers' is engendered by Anna's own sense of the importance of her school and university education based on her experiences. In light of this, it is apparent that she would want to provide more information about her academic performance as this is something to which she attaches great value. The use of 'endophoric markers' to provide detailed grades for her school and university education is also related to Anna's sense of 'self as author' as it is associated with her position, opinions and beliefs about her educational experiences. Anna's method of presenting the information relating to her academic performance as appendices can also be seen as a realisation of the writer's assumptions about the readers' expectations ('discoursal self') because she expressed that she wanted to emphasise the fact that she was a very good student to the readers.

5.2 The discoursal construction of identity in academic writing

The discussions in this chapter suggest that the use of metadiscoursal resources in Anna's PS, is highly associated with the writer's consideration of the aspects of the communicative function of the text; the discourse characteristics of the text; her sense of being an author who takes control of the text; the relationship between the writer and readers and the writer's assumptions about what may be valued and desired by her readers and target academic community. All of these elements can be associated with some aspects of writer identity as proposed by Ivanič (1998) and these aspects of writer identity are brought to the act of writing and they influence the way in which the student writes.

Generally speaking, Anna brought a considerable amount of ‘autobiographical self’ into the act of writing. This is because most of the content that appeared in her PS is associated with her experiences and background. Due to the limited space of the PS, Anna’s selection of the information that she wanted to convey to the readers was based on her consideration of the readers and the target discourse community and as such, it is associated with the aspect of her ‘discoursal self’ as it is concerned with “the writer’s voice in the sense of the way they want to sound” (Ivanič, 1998, p. 25). Anna also sees herself to a great extent as an author, as numerous ‘self-mention’ markers are found in her PS that can be associated with the aspect of ‘self as author’. Anna’s case highlights the idea that “language is always a consequence of interaction” and “as we speak or write, we negotiate with others, making decisions about the kind of effects we are having on our listeners or readers” (Hyland, 2005, p. 3). In this case, it can be argued that the metadiscoursal resources that have been discussed in this chapter are engendered by Anna’s sense of representation of herself in her text, trying to persuade and convince the readers that she is qualified to study in the targeted programme. Anna’s case reveals that her awareness of language use, assumptions about the PS, perceptions of audience expectation, and her sense of self as an author reflect upon the various metadiscoursal resources that have been identified from her PS.

5.3 Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed how the use of metadiscoursal resources can be associated with writer identity in texts by examining a case study with reference to the student’s PS and her interview data. By acknowledging the fact that writing is a social practice, I have drawn upon Ivanič’s notion of writer identity to investigate how the student positioned herself when she composed her PS. I have found that the use of metadiscoursal resources are closely associated with the writer’s communicative intentions and can be viewed as a realisation of the writer’s awareness of self and of the readers in the target community. Also, the interactive nature of written discourses between the writer and the readers is realised through the mediation of the text and marked linguistically in the text. This chapter and Chapter 4 contribute to the understanding of my first research question concerning

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how students position themselves in their PSs through a case study. In the next chapter, I will discuss writer-reader expectations and interpretations of the PS for PhD applications at the focal UK-based university, drawing on student and academic interview data.

Chapter 6 – The writer-reader expectations of the Personal Statement for the postgraduate programme application in a UK-based university

In this chapter, I examine the writer-reader expectations and understandings of the PSs for PhD applications in the UK to contribute to the understanding of my second research inquiry concerning the interpretations and perceptions of the PS that have been formed by students and academics at the focal UK-based university. Specifically, I make reference to interviews that I conducted with eight doctoral students and nine academics. These participants are from the field of education.

As I am primarily interested in the meaning of my participants' accounts in their interviews, the thematic approach (Burnard, 1991; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) that I have discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 was adopted for the purpose of establishing themes and sub-themes that are associated with writer-reader expectations of the PS. Where appropriate, this led to a closer examination of particular sections of my participants' interview accounts with reference to Fairclough's (2003) analytical concept of 'identification' (*see* Chapters 2 and 3 for a full account of this concept) that emphasises "the process of identifying, how people identify themselves and are identified by others" (p. 159) to strengthen my analysis.

With respect to Fairclough's concept of 'identification', my analysis pays attention to the categories of 'pronouns' and 'modality' as they are most relevant to my focus of understanding the speakers' 'identification' and their expression of particular topics. According to Fairclough (2003), the uses of 'pronouns' provide a sense of 'individuality' and 'collectivity'; and the choices in 'modality' suggest the speakers' degree of commitment as they "contribute to identification – commitments to truth, to moral obligation, to necessity, to values" (p. 162). Table 6.1 below summarises the linguistic features that are used to investigate the speakers' process of 'identification' in their interviews.

Table 6.1 Linguistic realisations in relation to ‘identification’ (Fairclough, 2003, pp. 162-171)

Linguistic features	
‘Pronouns’	“individuality” (‘I’); “first person statements” (‘I-statements’) “collectivity” (‘we’); “first person statements can also be plural” (‘we-statements’)
‘Markers of modalisation’	“modal verbs” (e.g., ‘can’, ‘will’, ‘may’, ‘must’, ‘would’, ‘should’) “modal adverbs” (e.g., ‘certainly’, ‘probably’, ‘possibly’) “modal adjectives” (e.g., ‘possible’, ‘probable’) “verbs of appearance” (e.g., ‘seem’, ‘appear’) “other types of adverbs” (e.g., ‘in fact’, ‘obviously’, ‘evidently’, ‘usually’, ‘often’) “hedges” (e.g., ‘sort of’, ‘kind of’) “subjectively marked modalities” (e.g., ‘I think the window is open’) “modalities which are not subjectively marked” (e.g., ‘The window’s open’)

This chapter also draws on the notion of academic literacies, with reference to the three main perspectives (‘study skills’, ‘academic socialisation’, ‘academic literacies’) proposed by Lea and Street (1998), as outlined in Chapter 2, as lenses through which to view the account I give concerning the exploration of writer-reader perceptions of the PS. In relation to the students’ writing, I also draw on Street’s more recent accounts of ‘hidden features’ (2009) in academic writing; here, he has referred to how concepts, such as ‘genre’, ‘audience’, and ‘identity’, relate to the process and judgments of academic writing.

This chapter comprises three sections that focus on different aspects of the discussion. Sections 6.1 and 6.2 present findings drawn from the academic and student interview data that I collected from the focal UK-based university. These two sections will be organised by the themes that I have arrived at from the thematic analysis and, where appropriate, analyses of the speakers’ choices in ‘pronouns’ and ‘modality’ are discussed to identify the speakers’ ‘identification’ to understand their stance towards particular issues they talked about. Section 6.3 provides a ‘telling case’ (Mitchell, 1984) that discusses the contrasting and contested views of the PS between a student and academics. Throughout my discussions in this chapter, I underline the key parts in the excerpts that I have drawn on from student and academic interview data.

6.1 Expectations of the Personal Statement: from the academics' perspectives

The interviews with the academics at the focal UK-based university suggest that they have clear ideas regarding what important elements need to be considered when reading students' PSs in the evaluation process. However, the role of the PS, from the academics' perspective, may not be straightforward as the PS is usually considered as only one of the parts in the application package. For example, I have found when academics talked about their expectations of the PS, they also mentioned other application documents (e.g., research proposal) as well as other issues concerning the evaluation process of the application. In light of this point, it is equally important to consider other issues that may contribute to the understanding of the academics' expectations of the PS. This would enable me to establish a better picture of academics' understandings of the PS and the associated evaluation processes. Table 6.2 below summarises the themes that are derived from the coding processes in relation to the academics' expectations of the PS:

Table 6.2 Academics' expectations of the PS at the focal UK-based institution

Themes and sub-themes
Theme 1: Content and writing in the PS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivation and commitment to the study • Relevant information that serves as an indication for student's proposed field of study • Textual logic and flow in the PS • Supporting and sufficient evidence to the claims given by students in their PSs
Theme 2: Academics' evaluation practices of the PS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PS as supplementary evidence for the research proposal

Although these academics are from different backgrounds of expertise, they appear to provide similar views concerning what they are looking for from reading students' PSs. The elements that they expect to see from reading the PS mostly refer to students' attributes, such as their 'motivation', 'commitment', and the 'relevant information' (e.g., 'previous achievements and experiences'). Some elements are associated with writing issues, including 'supporting evidence to the claims', 'logic and argument' in a text, and language usages. Some of their statements concerning their expectations of the PS are presented as follows:

Theme 1: Content and writing in the PS

Motivation and commitment to the study

Most of the academics stated that they want to gain ideas about students' motivation and commitment to their proposed study. For instance, one of the academics whom I interviewed stressed the importance of students' motivation for studying a PhD and its connection to students' commitment to do it when he was expressing his process of evaluating students' applications for admissions:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.1

George: ...it's a commitment, and you have to ... how should I say it, it's not in your head, you know, it's just much more in your heart, the commitment, because you go through too many things. And if you're doing it to get a PhD because you want to have PhD after your name, then the likelihood is that it's a weaker study and the student is weaker and they don't have the commitment to do it.

In Excerpt 6.1, the frequent use of the word 'commitment' in George's accounts seems to indicate that PhD study requires a large amount of time and energy. As such, it is reasonable to infer that if students do not know why they want to do a PhD or solely want to have PhD after their names as indicated by George, it may imply the weak motivation that results in an unconvincing case perceived by the academics.

Relevant information that serves as an indication for student's proposed field of study

When I interviewed the academics on their expectations of the PS, most of them (seven out of nine) commented that they want to see students' previous experiences and how those experiences have contributed to their proposed research. For instance, one of the academics stated as follows:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.2

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Bill: I want to see in the personal statement what has the person done previously and why is what they've done relevant to what they now want to do. That's what I would be looking for, first and second.

In Excerpt 6.2, Bill's account about the connection between students' experiences and their proposed research seems to suggest that not all the experiences of students should be included in the PS. Likewise, the other academic, Sam, stated that he wants to see students' 'background experiences', 'professional experiences', and 'personal experiences' that have contributed to their thinking and their ideas of their proposed research. Based on these academics' accounts, it can be said that candidates should mention only those experiences that are associated with what they have proposed to do in their PhD research. Another academic, George, also stated the issue of commitment in relation to the PhD study when he commented on one of the student PSs that I sent him earlier before the interview conducted. I have extracted the text taken from the student's PS to which he has commented:

Student's PS

Excerpt 6.3

Additionally, I have a great passion in music and I have passed a number of music exams. The fact that I have been attending piano lessons from the age of six, have helped me relax and gain confidence. Moreover, art is one of my favourite hobbies because it helps me to express my feelings and clear my thoughts combining it with my participation to a number of art competitions (see Appendix 5).

Academic's interview comments on student PS

Excerpt 6.4

George: I think if you're going to do a PhD it takes a lot of commitment to do the PhD. Nice to be able to play the piano and be able to take pressure off and things like that but I'm not really looking for a well-rounded person that maintains sports, maintains other sort of interests; I'm really concerned about the commitment to the study.

In Excerpt 6.4, George considers the text as shown in Excerpt 6.3 about 'attending piano lessons' and other extracurricular activities irrelevant as this type of information may not serve as an indication concerning the student's commitment to the doctoral study. George's perception of PhD study appears to shed light into why

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certain information may be considered irrelevant in the PS. His account also stresses the academics' concern to make a prediction about how committed students are in relation to their research project. However, the variations did occur amongst academics' view towards the information about 'extracurricular activities'. Interestingly, one of the academics, in fact, seemed to be curious about the information about these activities given by the student in her PS and would like to know more information concerning these activities. I will further discuss this point later in this section.

Many of the academics in my data drew on their experiences of evaluating many students' PSs and expressed that some information in the PS is not very helpful. For instance, many (six out of nine) stated that students very often write very nice things about the college at the end of their PSs. For instance, in Excerpt 6.5, one of the academics expressed that students always praise the institution that they apply for but this does not tell him anything useful about the students:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.5

Steven: So, I always start with that. I don't tend to take, pay very much attention to a personal statement because it doesn't tell you very much. Because people are clearly ... What's very common in personal statements is people saying how wonderful they think Putney (pseudonym) is and how much of a privilege it would be to study here which is ... it doesn't tell me anything at all!

Steven's account above is also emphasised when he commented on the student's PS that I sent him before the interview. The excerpt below is the final paragraph taken from one of the student's PSs:

Student's PS

Excerpt 6.6

Lastly, I am very looking forward to the prospect of doing a research degree at Putney (pseudonym), a university renowned for the excellence of its teaching and the calibre of its graduates. Being able to study a research programme at your university and learn from

specialised professors and leading principles in my subject area would fulfil my goals towards achieving my ideal professional study.

Academic's interview comments on student PS

Excerpt 6.7

Steven: We don't need to be told that we are a university renowned for the excellence of its teaching. Yeah? I know that if this person has applied to other institutions, he or she or whatever has said exactly the same, changing Putney for Queen or whatever. So that for me has just, it puts me off.

Likewise, Sam stated that it is a waste of space for students to praise the institution because this type of statement can be made by students regarding any institution they apply to. The academics' accounts with one accord appear to reveal the case that they have read numerous statements that refer to how good the institution is and have found this type of statement is repetitive and general. Such a finding may be similar to what Swales (2009) has called cultural ways of thinking and approaching the PS (*see* the discussions in Chapter 1: section 1.2.4). However, one of the academics, Sam, mentioned that it is fine to praise the institution but it needs to be done in a 'substantiated way' without 'overwording and overstating it' (Sam's words). He gave an example to illustrate this point:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.8

Sam: ...you can say that it's internationally recognised, that this institution or this department has built a very good impressive profile when it comes to, I don't know, Mathematics education for example, okay, "which is the case here. And I am hoping to take advantage to come and to be accepted into the programme, and tap into those resources and, you know, rub shoulders with students and staff in Mathematics education" Yeah, I mean that's praise but it's actually substantiated, you know. So if we have a centre for something, or something or other, you say, "my main reason is because I'm coming to this centre because it is one of the few research bodies, or research groups" that focus on some specific thing that you are most interested in.

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In Excerpt 6.8, Sam's account appears to suggest that instead of saying how wonderful the institution is, students should provide statements concerning the connection between them and the institution. The phrases, as I have underlined in Excerpt 6.8, such as 'internationally recognised', 'a very good impressive profile' seem to entail elements of 'praise'; however, when it goes along with the type of statement that is associated with the specific attributes for students' reasons for applying to a particular institution, it becomes more 'substantiated', as indicated by Sam. In the student's PS, as shown in Excerpt 6.6, from the academic's perspectives, it seems that the student merely praises the institution by saying 'a university renowned for the excellence of its teaching and the calibre of its graduates'. Although the student mentioned the benefit that she would gain from studying in this institution ('would fulfil my goals towards achieving my ideal professional study') and probably from the student's perspective, this has contributed to her reason and motivation to apply for this particular institution, such a statement about the benefit she envisioned herself to gain appears to be considered as requiring more information by the academics. More specifically, it may require more 'prospective accounts', a term which was used by the academics about how the institution is going to benefit students, what specifically the institution has strength in that link with the student's interests, and what students are going to bring to the institution.

Textual logic and flow in the PS

When the academics commented on the students' PSs, which I sent to them before the interviews, many commented that they wish to see the logic and flow in students' PSs, not just a list of information. For instance, George commented on one of the students' PSs as follows:

Student's PS

Excerpt 6.9

During my studies at the *University of Lefka* (pseudonym), I completed several research projects. Specifically, I conducted a quantitative investigation (questionnaire based) of the factors that influence the Greek Cypriot students' performance in the spelling of Greek language. I also carried out a qualitative exploration as to how the memory of our occupied land is being promoted in History lesson

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(interviews with primary school teachers and evaluation of the history textbooks).

Academic's interview comments on student PS

Excerpt 6.10

George: "During my studies at the University of Lefka (pseudonym) I did several research projects with a questionnaire base." Well, okay, so they've done things. Why have they done things? And so here it's much more of a listing of 'things that I've done', rather than 'what I want to do.' And so there's an awful lot of trivia here that I don't need to read because you already know what I'm going for.

In the PS as shown in Excerpt 6.9, the student stated that she had experiences of conducting research projects and also provided information of what these projects were about. However, George considers these statements as a list of 'trivia' that the student has done rather than statements concerning what she wants to do. In this case, George may want to see information concerning what the student wants to do for the doctoral study. For this reason, as long as the statements in the PS do not contribute to the overall picture concerning what the students want to do for their PhD study, they would be considered as 'trivial' or simply 'a list of things'. Likewise, the other academic commented on the other student's PS reveals a similar issue:

Student's PS

Excerpt 6.11

So far the course has covered grounds ranging from Foucault, Bourdieu, Sassure, Levi-Strauss to cognitivists such as Pinker.

Academic's interview comments on student PS

Excerpt 6.12

Steven: ... it mentions names, "Foucault", "Bourdieu" but it's a list of names. Yeah? So it's like I know these names. They are important names. I know about "Foucault", "Bourdieu", "Sassure"... but what do you know about them? What are they relevant? ... Why you are interested in them? What is it that "Foucault" said or "Bourdieu" said that makes you interested in this topic?

In Excerpt 6.11, the student mentioned lots of names, including 'Foucault', 'Bourdieu', 'Sassure', and 'Levi-Strauss' to illustrate the course she has taken.

However, this statement has been considered as ‘a list of names’. A series of questions as underlined in Excerpt 6.12 appears to indicate the academic’s concern to gain more information about the relevance between the important work of these people, which the student has come across, and her proposed research topic. Steven’s account seems to be related, rather, to what Sam called ‘a retrospective kind of account’ that concerns students’ reflection of their past experiences and how that drives them towards the research they want to pursue at the present.

Supporting and sufficient evidence to the claims given by students in their PSs

When the academics commented on the students’ PSs, many of them pointed out that there have been many occasions in which they found that the students did not provide sufficient information about what they intended to study and instead offered vague statements in their PSs. One of the academics commented on the paragraph extracted from one of my student participants in which it states her extra activities beyond her academic life.

Student’s PS

Excerpt 6.13

What is worth mentioning, too, is that, since I believe that education cannot be achieved only through books, I was involved in a number of extra activities. These activities have added colour and meaning in my life but also contributed in enriching my cultural world. Reading Greek and international literature was very beneficial as it helped me broaden my mind and look at everything from a different perspective... Additionally, I have a great passion in music and I have passed a number of music exams. The fact that I have been attending piano lessons from the age of six, have helped me relax and gain confidence.

Academic’s interview comments on the student’s PS

Excerpt 6.14

Bill: ...the person says, “I believe education cannot be achieved only through books. I was involved in a number of extra activities,” and I’m saying when? When did these activities take place? I don’t know when you mean. I think she means, “When I was at school,” or something but it’s not clear. And then this is another thing: “I attended piano lessons from the age of six.” I’ve put, “What levels

reached?” Because I’m looking for if you say, okay, I’ve been doing piano from the age of six, okay, and what happened? If you’re going to offer me that... or I started when I was six then I didn’t go again until I was ten. Or I started and I’m no good, didn’t achieve anything with it. So if you make a statement for this reader who doesn’t know you, you make the statement and then you back it up with something that the reader can say, “Oh, right, okay.” That’s something concrete.

In Excerpt 6.14, Bill commented on a section of the PS where the student referred to her interests and activities outside of academic life. The student mentioned that she was involved in a number of activities, such as ‘reading Greek and international literature’ and ‘playing music’. However, this paragraph about the student’s activities raised a series of questions from the academic: ‘when did these activities take place?’, ‘what levels [were] reached?’, and ‘what happened?’ (*see* the underlined parts in Excerpt 6.14). These questions appear to suggest that the information provided by the student is not sufficient, and it leads to many questions regarding the information offered in her PS. Also, Bill suggested that the statements in the PS need to be backed up by concrete examples. Steven also made a similar point about this paragraph in the student’s PS, suggesting that it does not offer enough details. Despite the fact that Bill and Steven would like to know more information about the extra activities mentioned by the student, as I have mentioned earlier, the information concerning the extra activities may also be considered as irrelevant by some other academics, as is evident in George’s comments on this student’s statement about her extra activities (*see* Excerpt 6.4 for George’s comment). Such an observation has reinforced my argument that PSs belong to an ‘unstable genre’, within which academics can influence meanings and interpretations of the PSs (*see* discussion in Chapter 1).

Based on this discussion, it suggests that even in the same department, the views of the academics towards the PS may not be homogenous as in the focal institutional context. Each academic has their own individual application evaluation practice, as I will discuss in detail shortly in this section. Such issues of variation amongst the academics may compound the challenges for applicants to meet the academics’

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expectations as what often happens is that an applicants' application is reviewed by more than one academic.

Although students may know briefly what things should be addressed in this document, due to the fact that it does not specify to what extent these points should be covered, sometimes the statements that are offered are 'understated' or 'overstated'. In light of this point, the academics may feel, on some occasions that students have made statements that are unnecessary while on other occasions, they might feel the students have not provided enough information to help the reader gain insight into their thoughts, ideas, and interests.

When I asked the academics to comment on the students' PSs, many stressed that they want to see supporting evidence to students' claims in their PSs. In Excerpt 6.15, Bill expressed that he wants to see supporting evidence of students' claims as he feels that any applicant could say anything about themselves to impress the academics:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.15

Bill: Right. I think the personal statement should have tell you something about the person and what they've achieved, so it shouldn't just be... I don't know, it shouldn't just be something that says, "I'm a very hardworking person." If you're going to say, "I'm a very hardworking person," I want to see what's your evidence for that assertion, you know. Or if you say, I don't know, "I'm a very creative person," tell me why, what's the evidence for it. I think it puts me off if somebody makes claims for themselves and there's nothing to support it. Because then I feel anybody could say anything about themselves and why should you accept it just because somebody says it.

Bill's comment on what students might say about themselves highlights the issue of persuasion in the PS (e.g., 'I'm a very hardworking person'). As the PS provides a space for students to write things about themselves, it is expected that students will choose to write something that would promote their abilities and persuade academics that they are qualified to study for a PhD. At first glance, the example of 'I'm a very

hardworking person' given by Bill appears to be a positive statement as it is expected that academics would prefer to accept students who are hardworking and diligent in their study. However, Bill stated that it does not convince him if students only make claims but do not offer any examples to support them.

Theme 2: Academics' evaluation practices of the PS

PS as supplementary evidence for the research proposal

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, my central focus has to do with an investigation of the PS, while at the same time, I have also acknowledged that certain connections occur amongst application documents as they all play a role in the whole application process. The major theme I have arrived at concerning the connection between the PS and other application documents is that the PS may be considered to be less important than the research proposal since it serves as a supplementary document for the research proposal for PhD applications to the UK-based institutions. For instance, Bill expressed his view that the PS is less important than the research proposal:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.16

Bill: ... I mean personal statements are useful, but if the proposal is weak, then the personal statement is often of no interest. You know, 'cause sometimes people will tell you a lot about themselves, which is interesting, but then the proposal is no good, then there's no point. So the personal statement is less important than the proposal.

In Excerpt 6.16, Bill's comments on the relationship between the PS and research proposal may relate to the academics' perceptions of PhD study. According to the academics, one of the key features of PhD study is the close connection between students and supervisors. More specifically, as soon as students start their study, their supervisors will guide them on their individual research topic. In light of this, it is not hard to imagine that research proposals may play a more crucial role than the PS in the application document as the academics may wish to know students' research interests and aim to ensure a match between their expertise and the student's proposed field of study. Also, as the research proposal usually contains

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more specific information about the research than the PS does, it seems to be the case that the academics often read the research proposal rather than the PS to identify whether a potential student's research interest matches their own expertise. For instance, one of the academics said that she will look at the research proposal before going to the PS because she wants to see if a student's research interest matches hers. Despite the fact that many of the academics have stated that the research proposal may play a more important role than the PS in the application evaluation process, when I asked them to rate the importance of different parts of the application document, many of them responded that they probably would not say one is more important than the other one as they often use different parts of the application to get a sense of applicants as a whole. When I asked the academics about their views on the importance of the PS and the research proposal, Alex commented:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.17

Alex: ...earlier I said probably the research proposal was more interesting, but in a way it's probably the whole application I think. I wouldn't necessarily say one is more important than the other one. Again they're an application form in a way and it's the real person you're interested in so you're just using those as a filter to see whether you think the person is potentially worth interviewing and is potentially a reasonable student.

In Excerpt 6.17, when I asked Alex which document he considers the most important, he responded that the research proposal may be more 'interesting'. It is interesting to note that Alex used the word 'interesting' rather than the word 'important', which was prompted by me in my interview question to him. This type of response by Alex may be associated with the concept of 'identification' proposed by Fairclough (2003) which signals his cautiousness of offering his opinion on the topic concerning rating the importance of application documents. Also, the marker of modalisation 'probably' that appeared twice in Alex's account, as I have underlined, seems to suggest Alex's lesser degree of commitment to the proposition. Alex also expressed that the whole application serves as 'a filter' to gain a sense of students so it is usually considered as a whole rather than individual parts of the application.

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Likewise, another academic, Susan, stated that if she had to choose, she usually weights the research proposal the most as it helps determine whether the research interest fits. Her account indicates that if she was not asked to rate the application document, she might not express which document is more important than the other. Based on this discussion, the different parts of the application package, from the academics' perspectives, may have certain connections because of the goal of getting a sense of the applicants from different parts of the application. In light of this point, the academics may not view them as discrete individual documents from each other in an application package. This is highlighted by one of the academics:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.18

Bill: ... if the proposal is good you'd hope the personal statement would back it up by giving you information about how the person developed an interest in the area for the research proposal, and any things they've done related to the research proposal.

In Excerpt 6.18, Bill's account seems to suggest that the PS serves as supplementary information of the research proposal. This may be due to the fact that the academics may want to speculate information about students' motivation and commitment to the study as I have discussed earlier in this chapter. Thus, the academics usually look for this type of information in students' PSs within the overall array of documents.

6.2 Expectations of the Personal Statement: from students' perspectives

This section aims to discuss the students' perceptions of the PS. Table 6.3 below summarises the emerging themes that are derived from the students' interview data:

Table 6.3 Students' expectations of the PS at the focal UK-based institution

Themes and sub-themes

Theme 1: Content and writing in the PS

- Motivation to the study
- Previous relevant information (teaching/working/research experiences)
- Show one's 'personality'

Theme 2: Writing practices of the PS

- Personal statement is less important than the research proposal for PhD applications
- The extent to which the students know their readers/supervisors may influence their perceptions of the PS

Theme 1: Content and writing in the PS

As for expectations of the PS from the perspectives of students, most of them have stated that they tend to address their motivation for their proposed field of study, academic background and relevant previous experiences. One of the students, Anna, stated as follows:

Student's interview

Excerpt 6.19

Anna: Okay, hmmm hmmm. Er about your education, where your BA was, maybe er what modules you did. Um for me, because I am a teacher in this point means that if I have a teaching experience, working experience. And they think it is also important to trying to show them your personality, not just er I did that, I did that, I did that. So, that's why I included some of my activities beyond education.

In Excerpt 6.19, when I asked Anna about her assumptions regarding the PS, she replied with the statements of 'education', 'module', 'teaching experience', 'working experience', and 'personality'. It is interesting to note that the student used 'your' and 'you' in the phrases of 'where your BA was', and 'what modules you did' while she used the first person pronoun ('me' and 'I') in her accounts about 'teaching' and 'working' experiences (e.g., 'for me, because I am a teacher in this point means that if I have a teaching experience, working experience'). The use of 'second personal pronouns' ('you', 'your') in the first part of Anna's utterances can be seen as the 'impersonal uses of personal pronouns' (Kitagawa & Lehrer, 1990) in the sense that Anna was not referring to the interviewer's 'education' or 'module' nor the speaker

herself. More specifically, the use of ‘you’ and ‘your’ is ‘generic’ as it is here “a stylistically less formal variant of non-deictic one” (Huddleston, 1984, p. 288). As such, the words ‘you’ and ‘your’ in this case can be interpreted as revealing a general view concerning the contents that would be considered as important to include in the PS. Also, a shift in pronoun use from the words ‘you’ and ‘your’ to the first person pronoun (‘me’, ‘I’) indicates the move of Anna’s stance from a more general view towards a more personal one in which Anna was talking about the importance of including the ‘teaching experience’ and ‘working experience’ in her PS. Instead of using the words ‘you’ and ‘your’ to refer to this content, she used the first person pronoun (‘I’ and ‘me’) to express her experiences of being a teacher.

In Excerpt 6.19, Anna also stated that it is important to show her ‘personality’. In fact, some other students shared a similar view in the interviews (e.g., ‘you can see the personality of the person coming through in the PS’). The students’ accounts have also drawn attention to the PS as being a genre that is considered as more ‘private and personal’. This is particularly clear when I asked students about their views on the PS and the research proposal. Specifically, the students provided accounts concerning the comparison between these two parts of application document:

Student’s interview

Excerpt 6.20

Margaret: I think the personal statement, as the name suggests, is more personal in the sense it has more of you in it, of [...] according to me the expectation of the research proposal is formal and public, whereas the expectation the personal statement is that you would be able to say some things about yourself and you are allowed to use that voice, you know, the difference between active voice and passive voice.

Student’s interview

Excerpt 6.21

Flower: ... the personal statement is me, I want to do something, the research proposal was one way of doing that something but there could have been another way. I could have written 15 different research proposals but I could only have written one personal statement.

As can be seen from Excerpts 6.20 and 6.21, the students considered the PS as a space to address where they are from, who they are, and other personal information. In contrast, they regarded the research proposal as a document in which their proposed research topics should be addressed and comparatively less personal than what they do for their PSs.

Theme 2: Writing practices of the PS

Although most of the students expressed their perceptions of the PS during the interview, I have noticed that from the students' perspective, they tend not to pay as much attention to the PS as they do to their research proposals. This is evident that some students informed me that they could not locate their PSs as they did not know where they were, or they could not remember if they had written one for their doctoral application. In fact, many students have stated that the research proposal is more important than the PS for a PhD application to the UK-based institutions.

Also, amongst the students who gave me their PSs, I have found most of them only wrote a couple of short paragraphs and this fact differed from the expectation that I had before interviewing the students. I had assumed that students would have written around 2-3 pages PSs for their applications as is usually indicated in the existing studies on the PS (Swales, 2009). From these observations, at first glance, it seems that the PS may not be valued much by the students. However, I have found that such a perception of the PS ('the PS may not be important') given by the students are closely associated with their awareness of potential supervisors as readers and their general understanding of the doctoral programme application. For instance, most of the students in my data (seven out of eight) have certain connections with the faculty in their targeted academic community. Some of them have met their potential supervisors at academic conventions, such as conferences, or have communicated with them via phone or emails. Some of my student participants had studied for their Master degrees at the institution where they wished to continue their study as a PhD student. In light of this fact, it can be said that students knew details of their potential supervisor's research expertise and that the academics may have known the applicants to a certain extent based upon their previous encounters with them. For

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instance, one of the students said that she and her potential supervisors have known each other for around six or seven years so her potential supervisors know quite a lot about her weaknesses and strengths. As such, she felt it is unnecessary to provide as much information about herself as those who are completely new to the faculty or institution.

From this point of view, it seems to downplay the purpose of writing a PS because it tends to be considered as a document for students to introduce themselves to readers and write something to promote themselves, in the way it is usually suggested in the existing studies on the PS. Such a finding brings out the importance of taking into account “the processes of meaning-making and contestation around meaning rather than as skills or deficits” (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159). I will elaborate this point further in Chapter 8 where I compare and contrast the practices that underlay the important elements that concern the students and academics in relation to the PS from the two focal universities.

Also, the students’ perceptions of the PS may be influenced by their understandings of the doctoral programme. This is evident when students talked about their perceptions of the PS in relation to different educational levels. One of the students stated as follows:

Student’s interview

Excerpt 6.22

Maria: Maybe I didn’t attempt er, didn’t pay too much attention to the personal statement at PhD level. Knowing that no-one cares about it anyway. ((Laughing))

In Excerpt 6.22, Maria’s account about her views of the PS (‘didn’t pay too much attention to the personal statement’) may be associated with her perceptions of the PhD level of study. In fact, she stated that the PS is less important than the research proposal as the research proposal plays a key role in determining whether the potential supervisors will be interested in their proposed research topics. Maria’s account appears to reveal her understanding of PhD study of which a ‘match’

between the student's research interest and supervisor's expertise is one of the main things for PhD study.

6.3 Writer-reader contrasting expectations and interpretations of the Personal Statement: The use of quotation

In sections 6.1 and 6.2, I have discussed the expectations and understandings of the PS from the students' and academics' perspectives. Here, I examine a telling case to illustrate the conflict amongst the different perspectives in interpreting the requirement of the PS amongst students and the academics. Specifically, an area of conflict amongst different perspectives on the PS amongst students and academics concerns the use of quotations in students' PSs. The concept of quotations came to the fore in most of the interviews when the academics read and commented on the students' PSs. In other words, it seems that the use of quotations in students' PSs may trigger the academics' attention and arouse varied interpretations of those quotes in the PS. In this discussion, I draw on a Greek doctoral student's (Anna) PS, her interviews, and six academics interviews and their comments on Anna's PS.

There is a significant contrast between assumptions made by Anna and those made by the academics in reference to the opening paragraph in Anna's PS. This PS was submitted to a PhD programme in education in the UK-based university. In the following sections, I will describe Anna's accounts in the interview where she discussed her writing practices for her opening paragraph in her PS. The academics' comments on Anna's opening paragraph in her PS will also be reported. Here, it should be noted that although the focus of the discussion in this section is on the contrasting views between Anna and the academics in relation to the opening paragraph in Anna's PS, where appropriate, I will also draw on interview data concerning the academics' perceptions of PhD study and their evaluation process of application documents to complement the discussion. This section aims to contribute to an understanding of conflicting and contested nature of writing and evaluation practices in relation to the PS between the student and academics.

Anna's opening paragraph in her PS is as follows:

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Student's PS

Excerpt 6.23

I cannot find any better way to start this statement than with a quotation by Socrates: 'the only thing I know is that I know nothing' (εν οίδα ότι ουδέν οίδα). His words nicely express my profound beliefs on spiritual cultivation and my desire for expanding my knowledge continuously and persistently.

In Excerpt 6.23, Anna used Socrates' words ('the only thing I know is that I know nothing') and at the same time aligned herself with this quotation ('his words nicely express...') to show herself as a person who has 'profound beliefs on spiritual cultivation' and is eager to gain knowledge. The following are her comments on this opening paragraph:

Anna's interview comments on her PS

Excerpt 6.24

Anna: what I am trying to show from this statement is my personality, my qualifications but also my personality that I am a person who wants to learn continuously what I am trying to say here is that in all my life, from the first paragraph which is my introduction I try to say that for my whole life, I try to learn and learn. I have never felt satisfied with my knowledge.

From Anna's perspective, she stressed the importance of showing her 'personality' as a person who desires to gain knowledge. She also expressed the reason she valued education and learning, and wanted to portray her identity as a person with a strong desire to gain knowledge continuously:

Anna's interview comments on her PS

Excerpt 6.25

Anna: this is something important for me as a person that my parents are refugees but they tried to give me the opportunity to be here. They started from having nothing and we're not rich, but we are okay and this is what I'm trying to say that from nothing my parents made me the person that I am, that I don't give a lot of importance in money and that the important for me is my education. I'm a person who wants to learn; who believes that education and knowledge is the most important thing.

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The Excerpt 6.25 has already been discussed in Chapter 5 where I explored the relations between Anna's use of metadiscoursal resources and the identity that she brought to the act of writing. Here, Anna talked about the influence of her family background.

From Anna's interview, she also stated that the element of 'personality' is what academics expect her to write in her PS ('I believe this is what they [academics] expect you to write'). This statement reveals her assumptions about the readers' expectation of what information applicants should include in their PSs. However, it seems that Anna's opening paragraph has not appealed to the academics. The following provides data on the academics' comments on Anna's opening paragraph:

Academic's interview comments on Anna's PS

Excerpt 6.26

Steven: "I cannot find any better way to start this statement than with a quotation by Socrates." Now as soon as if someone mentions 'Socrates' in the first in the opening of their personal statement, I think they are simply trying to impress... which raises suspicions. If I think someone's simply quoting names, yeah, that people see as intellectual names, then I might think, well, what they are trying to mask here? They're trying to impress with this kind of citation by masking the lack of substance in their writing. So that puts me off for a start.

In Excerpt 6.26, Steven mentioned issues of 'trying to impress' and for him this 'raises suspicions'. As such, it appears to be the case that the use of the Socrates' quotation engendered a negative image for this academic. In fact, many other academics took a similar view. For instance, the use of the Socrates' quotation was considered by them to be an expression of 'trying to create a very good first impression', as someone wishing 'to announce themselves in a big way', and at the same time it also sounds like a bit 'overblown and flowery', a 'cliché', 'trivial', and 'a high style'. One of the academics felt this opening paragraph did not tell him anything as he expressed that anybody could say anything about themselves wanting to impress and that at the end they were 'just words'.

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Based on the metadiscourse analysis of Anna's PS in Chapter 4, it seems that Anna tried to guide the readers through her text with a clear flow of information and to engage the readers to give the message ('personality') she attempted to get across to the readers. In her opening paragraph, many metadiscoursal devices such as 'self-mentions', 'boosters', 'attitude markers' and 'evidentials', have been adopted in her text for communication. More specifically, Anna's opening paragraph appears to be academically-oriented as it includes the use of a quotation from a famous person ('Socrates'), and the use of big words such as 'profound beliefs' and 'spiritual acculturation'. However, it appears to be the case that the convention of the PS is not just about being academic or simply about the surface features, grammar, and spelling, in the way that has been suggested by the perspective of 'study skills' (Lea & Street, 1998) but has to do with the understandings of implicit features of the PS such as 'audience' and 'genre' than the surface textual features of the text in Anna's PS.

Anna's and the academics' comments on the opening paragraph as shown in Excerpts 6.24 – 6.26 seem to highlight a fundamental difference in terms of what Anna perceives to be the academics' expectations and what the academics expect to find out when reading her PS. The possible explanations for the different understandings of the PS between Anna and the academics may be interpreted as two-fold:

Firstly, Anna and the academics may possess different expectations and interpretations of the PS. As I have discussed in section 6.2, the academics look for students' motivation and commitment to the study, and relevant information that has contributed to the student's current research interest; however, Anna, in her opening paragraph, attempted to show her 'personality' as a person who has a strong desire for pursuing knowledge. As the element of 'personality' is not featured on the academics' list of their top concerns, they may not appreciate the cues prompted by Anna in her PS. The academics might consider the statements in Anna's opening paragraph as being irrelevant because they do not provide information that would enable them to determine the student's ability to undertake the doctoral study.

The other reason for such a different perspective between Anna and the academics may be associated with what Lea and Street (1998) have emphasised that the epistemology that underlies the writing is often implicit to students. More specifically, the academics' epistemology that have underpinned their perceptions of the PS may be rooted in their understanding of the nature of PhD study in the particular academic community, as opposed to students who have not yet familiarised with the 'culture' of the academy in the targeted academic community (Lea & Street, 1998). When I interviewed the academics about their perceptions of the PS, they often referred to the nature of PhD study in order to explain why certain elements should be addressed in the PS. While the academics stated their perceptions of the nature of PhD study, interestingly, Anna did not mention much about the nature of PhD study. In fact, the accounts regarding the nature of PhD study appear to be less frequent in students' interviews. This observation may serve as an indication of the diverse expectations between Anna and the academics regarding Anna's opening paragraph in her PS. Although there are overlapping views between Anna's and the academics concerning the elements that should be included in the PS such as 'relevant information for the proposed field of study' and 'motivation', the writer-reader assumptions that underlie (*or* associate with) these views appear to differ and hence create the conflicting and contested nature of writing and evaluation practices of the PS. The following sections discuss the academics' perceptions of PhD study. Table 6.4 below summarises the theme – 'academics' perceptions of PhD study':

Table 6.4 Academics' perceptions of PhD study at the UK-based institution

Sub-themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PhD is fundamentally difficult • PhD is academically very demanding • PhD is a long-term commitment • Close supervisory relationship between students and supervisors; tutor's responsibility • Area(s) matches between student and supervisor expertise

When I interviewed academics regarding their evaluations of the application documents, many stated that PhD study is constructed as fundamentally 'hard and difficult' and 'academically very demanding'. They also stressed that the key feature

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of the PhD study is a close working relationship between students and supervisors. The following accounts are stated by the academics regarding their perceptions of PhD study.

When I asked the academics to compare the PS and research proposal, and other application documents, one of them mentioned that ‘academic performance’ is very important for studying a PhD as it is ‘hard and difficult’.

Academic’s interview

Excerpt 6.27

Bill: You don’t want to be taking somebody to do a PhD whose performances previously are not strong, unless you might do it, but if there is a fantastic research proposal backed up by a personal statement which is very, very strong and shows a clear match and very strong motivation, and it matches your interest, then you might say, well, I want to talk to the person. But if it’s, you know, a weak academic performance, then you might think, you know, why am I taking on this person because a PhD is hard and difficult and lasts for many years. You’re just caught into trouble, to buy trouble, to take somebody who has problems academically.

In Excerpt 6.27, Bill stressed the importance of ‘academic performance’ as PhD study is a ‘written thing’. In his account, Bill used the words ‘hard’ and ‘difficult’ to describe the process and experiences of doing a PhD. Also, it is interesting to note that there is frequent use of the second person pronoun ‘you’ and ‘your’ instead of first person pronoun ‘I’, and ‘my’ in Bill’s accounts. For instance, Bill used ‘you’ in his account of ‘you don’t want to be taking somebody to do a PhD whose performances previously are not strong’. Bill referred to ‘you’ rather than ‘I’, which may suggest less self-authority and more reference to the general principles that all academics would follow. The use of a second person pronoun instead of first person pronoun may be interpreted as an attempt to downplay the presence of the speaker himself. In fact, many instances of such a use of personal pronoun occurred consistently throughout Bill’s accounts during the interview. These instances may be associated with Bill’s process of identifying himself in relation to his position as an academic who evaluates students’ applications and in relation to me as the

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researcher. Specifically, Bill may consciously position himself in a particular way by his process of ‘identification’ (Fairclough, 2003). For instance, Bill may be aware that he was being interviewed by a researcher who was collecting data for a thesis and would use his data to discuss the findings. This may have left him feeling cautious about his responses to my questions. For this reason, he may respond not as an individual but as a representative of a category – the academics. In other words, it may be common that academics have such a cautiousness in which the professionals may avoid committing themselves to taking firm positions at an individual level but rather attribute them to general principles.

In addition to the use of a second person pronoun, the use of ‘maker of modalisation’ occurs in Bill’s accounts in places where he made possible inferences about the thoughts and actions he might take in hypothetical situations. For instance, the use of ‘might’ occurs in the sentences of ‘you might do it’, ‘you might say’, and ‘you might think’ (as I have underlined in Excerpt 6.27), seems to indicate the speaker’s decision not to make a full commitment to a proposition. The use of the second person pronoun and makers of modalisation may suggest Bill’s acknowledgment of heterogeneous evaluation practices of the application documents amongst the other academics at the same institution. In other words, it can be said that Bill took a safe approach to avoid offering views that would contrast with those of other faculty members.

Another academic, Steven, also indicated his views towards doing a PhD study by addressing the difficulty of doing a PhD, which requires a long-term ‘commitment’. This account echoes Bill’s statement that PhD study lasts for many years.

Academic’s interview

Excerpt 6.28

Steven: And I’m looking for someone who knows what they’re letting themselves in for ((laughing)) because it requires a huge amount of, hmmm as you know, commitment, sustained effort, and belief in the subject, real motivation and investment in the subject, not just because they want a qualification, it’s not a qualification as such. I see it as something very, very different from most of the other academic

qualifications that people study for. It's not something that just study and pass, it becomes your life for a few years...

In Excerpt 6.28, when I asked Steven about his view on the credentials necessary for a potential student to gain a place in a course of study, he referred to the importance of student motivation as PhD study requires ‘a huge amount of commitment’, ‘sustained effort’, ‘belief in the subject’, and ‘real motivation and investment in the subject’. Steven also mentioned that PhD study becomes a part of a student’s life as it lasts for a few years. Although Steven did not explicitly state which credentials are the most important for a student to gain a place, his response regarding his perceptions of PhD study brought out his emphasis on student motivation for a study. Steven also mentioned that a PhD is different from most of the other academic qualifications because it requires a lot of commitment. Similarly, Bill also stated that a PhD is different from Bachelor or Masters degrees and brought out the issue of close connections between supervisors and their students, which lasts several years:

Academic’s interview

Excerpt 6.29

Bill: If you're admitting somebody to, let's say a BA degree here, you think well, they're here for three years, I might be teaching this person three different courses. If you're doing a Masters you say, well taught Masters, one year full-time, two years part-time, and I might teach them a couple of modules, that's it, maybe dissertation supervision. But if you're taking somebody for a PhD, you're going to have a very close connection with them (students) for four years. So I think let's focus on what is the topic, what's the research area, is it close to mine? Is it linked to the thought in your mind? Can I live with this person for four years intensively? Because if somebody's a full-time student you're going to see them every two weeks for years. So if the actual meaning of what they want to do isn't clear and it's not close to your interests, then, you know, you wouldn't want to do it. I think that's really important.

A series of questions such as ‘what is the topic’, ‘what’s the research area’, and ‘is it close to mine’ appear to stress the importance of a research interest that must be shared by students and supervisors. Bill also stated that as a supervisor to a student, they have to meet students ‘every two weeks for years’, which reveals the

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commitment that must be made to the student's research project. In fact, all the academics whom I interviewed have emphasised that the key factor in considering whether to accept potential students depends upon a match between the student's research interest and supervisor's expertise as they will have to work with the students and guide them through their PhD journey. Similarly, Bill pointed that once he has agreed to supervise a student he would have the 'responsibility' to guide that person for many years. As such, he stressed that for students, it is important for them to identify potential supervisors and their expertise before the application is made.

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.30

Bill: I suppose for the applicant, it's important that they take the trouble to identify the right kind of supervisor first and don't just send a vague application to a department, because people will think, "Well, you know, it's so vague I don't want to take on somebody who doesn't know really what they're interested in and then I have them for years, it's my responsibility."

In Excerpt 6.30, it is stated that it is important for students to 'identify the right kind of supervisor first' and should not 'just send a vague application to a department'. This statement stresses the importance of the issue of 'matchness' that applicants must take into consideration in the process of writing their application.

Although I have found that the attribute of 'personality' is not part of the academics' concerns based on their interviews, it does appear that the academics would consider the attribute of being hard-working and possessing a strong desire for knowledge and learning as being positive elements. From this viewpoint, Anna's attempt to show her 'personality' as a person with eagerness to gain knowledge should not enact the negative views from the academics. In fact, the academics did not specifically state that students should not be allowed to show their 'personality' nor use quotations. One of the tutors suggested as follows:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.31

Bill: So for something like this what you want to know is tell me about yourself directly, about things that are relevant to the application you're making and, when you make a claim for yourself, back it up with some evidence.

Bill's account in Excerpt 6.31 appears to indicate his preference for the writing style of the PS. He also stressed that if students make a claim, they should provide concrete examples to support it. From this point of view, it can be inferred that the opening paragraph in Anna's PS may be considered as 'hollow statements (my term)' as it does not supply specific examples to illustrate her intended meaning. As such, these statements may appear to be unconvincing to the readers. While the academics regarded the use of quotations at the beginning of the PS as unappealing, they seemed to have some tolerance for this style of writing ('I wouldn't put it past her [Anna] because I just think it's a sort of style of doing it'; 'a different cultural style has developed over time'). More specifically, the academics have alluded to the fact that there are 'cultural differences' of which people have different ways of 'describing themselves'. Such a finding is associated with what Swales (2009) stated that different styles of writing may be a result of cultural conditioning (*see* the discussions in Chapter 1: section 1.2.4). In light of this point, it seems there is a genre issue regarding the PS as students from diverse backgrounds may approach the PS differently as a text type; however, their approaches may not match the academics' expectations.

One of the academics, Bill, stated that many students demonstrate that they have misunderstood what a personal statement should be about. This is the case when they get into too much detail about themselves and the document becomes 'autobiographical' and 'navel gazing'. Bill further stressed that there has to be a certain element of 'impersonality' in an application being made to an institution. Bill's statement of 'impersonality' is associated with his perception of the PhD study as he expressed that one's biography is only important to one as an individual while at the end of the day, at the end of the PhD study, what matters the most is how the 'personal histories', 'investments' are going to combine to actually help drive 'the pursuit of knowledge' in a productive way. Such an account seems to suggest that too much 'autobiographical self' (Ivanič, 1998) as presented in students' PSs may

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not sound appealing to the academics as what concerns the academics the most is whether applicants have the capacity to do a PhD as suggested by many academics. In other words, what may concern the academics the most may be associated with ‘retrospective and prospective accounts’ as suggested by one of the academics.

Based on this discussion, it can be said that the aspect of ‘discoursal self’ (Ivanič, 1998) that students bring to the act of writing may be crucial as it concerns the characteristics of particular pieces of writing that may steer writer’s selection of the content in their PSs. Here, I am not saying that the aspect of ‘autobiographical self’, as presented in PS text, is less important than the aspect of ‘discoursal self’. Specifically, the aspect of ‘discoursal self’ may help applicants to select their personal information (‘autobiographical self’) that is most relevant to the expectation of the academics. As such, it may help the academics quickly identify how the students’ background and prior experiences connect with their motivation to apply for a PhD study.

As I already discussed, there are discrepancies between Anna’s and the academics’ responses towards Anna’s opening paragraph in her PS. Although most of the academics specified the unappealing feature of Anna’s opening paragraph, two of the academics did not really address it as an issue. They stated that they would not pay much attention to the PS as they do to the other application documents because some information in the PS may not help to determine students’ capacity for completing a PhD (e.g., ‘praising the institution’, ‘cultural way of approaching the PS’). From this observation, it can be said that the academics’ perceptions of the PS and their evaluation practices are not homogeneous and this complicates the criteria concerning this particular type of text. In fact, another important theme that emerged from my data is: ‘academics’ evaluation process of application documents’. Table 6.5 below summarises this theme:

Table 6.5 Academics' evaluation process of application documents at the focal UK-based institution

Sub-themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No particular institutional criteria on document evaluation • Sense of an applicant's competence ('impressionistic judgement') • Tensions between official criteria and individual professional practices • Different evaluation practices of application documents across a faculty

According to the academics (9 out of 9) in my study, there are no particular institutional criteria for them to follow when they evaluate students' applications. In light of this point, it can be inferred that different academics may have different evaluation practices. When I asked the academics whether there are any institutional criteria that they need to follow when they evaluate an applicant's application for admissions, Bill commented as follows:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.32

Bill: No. No, I just think are their (students') interests similar to mine? How well formulated is the proposal? Does it feel like a person who might be, you know, together with their qualifications, capable of doing a PhD? That's what I would think of. But there's no- nobody puts any pressure on me.

Bill further mentioned his perception of the PhD study and its connection with the institutional criteria as follows:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.33

Bill: I think the PhD is different to some other things because it's very much it's more subtle than a taught programme. It's matching the interests of the potential researcher with a supervisor, so you can't have any, I can't imagine how you'd have something that would be laid down by institution because the institution doesn't know about all the specialities. I mean they might try it, but I think it would cause a lot of problems if they did that.

In Excerpt 6.33, Bill mentioned that for PhD study, it is important to ensure the student's research interest matches the potential supervisor's. He also expressed that the institution will not be able to identify the matches for students and academics as

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it does not have a clear idea of every supervisor's expertise so it is very difficult for the institution to help match up the interests of students and supervisors. As such, it is not possible for the institution to establish standard criteria for evaluating the application documents. As there is no standard institutional criterion for the evaluation, it is possible to infer that each academic may develop their own practices in the evaluation of these documents based upon their own experiences over time. One of the academics stated:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.34

Steven: ... when I first started supervising PhDs what I did was to look at, make sure I looked at the guidelines for writing research proposals that the college provides on the website. And so I sort of set my own criteria by looking at that and then trying to determine whether or not a proposal met the kind of criteria set out in the guidelines. Um and then it's simply, I think, applying my experiences of doing PhD research and reading research.

In Excerpt 6.34, Steven mentioned that he initially followed some criteria provided by the university website concerning what content should be included in a research proposal. As he gained more experience in evaluating documents, he began to integrate the guidelines listed on the website with his 'experiences of doing PhD research' and to create his own criteria. Based on this discussion, it can be said that over time the academics' experiences of evaluating application documents may come to unconsciously influence their evaluation scheme and allow them to develop a more personal sense of what types of students they are looking for. In fact, Steven has referred to the term 'impressionistic judgement' to illustrate his evaluation practices. When I asked Steven about his perceptions of the weighting of different parts of the application documents (e.g., academic transcripts amongst others), he stated that he could not specify the weighting for each document as he looks at all the aspects of the application together and then gains an 'impression' of an applicant:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.35

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Steven: So I wouldn't be able to say... I couldn't give percentage figures to show you the weighting of each aspect of an applicant's...hmmm...sort of overall background. I just look at their proposal, their background and everything together and then give an impressionistic judgement.

Similar to Steven's view, Bill stated that he wants to gain a sense of whether a student has a similar research interest to his own, and has offered a well-written research proposal, and 'together with their qualifications' is 'capable of doing a PhD'. Based on these accounts, it can be inferred that to gain a sense of an applicant's competence may be the key element for academics from reading through the application documents. In fact, most of the academics mentioned that they always go through student application documents very quickly, trying to gain a sense of where students come from, how old they are, and their particular research interest. This may be more 'impressionistic' and again does not correspond to an institutional or formal set of criteria.

Also, the different evaluation practices of application documents across a faculty become clear when I observed the variety of responses in their statements concerning their perceptions of word limits for the research proposal and the PS. During the interviews, when I asked the tutors about the word limit for research proposals and PSs, they offered differing accounts. For instance, Steven said that there 'should be a maximum 1,500 words' for the research proposal while Jason stated it might be between 1000 to 2000 words. However, the official guideline set out on the college website reveals the limit for the research proposal should be approximately 1000 words. The difference amongst/between academics' statements and the official guidelines reflect the differences between 'institutional practice' and 'individual professional practice'. One of the academics, Steven, commented:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 6.36

Steven: So, the institution might say maximum 1,500 words but on the whole, most supervisors probably are not interested that much in the word account.

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In Excerpt 6.36, the modal auxiliary verb ‘might’ suggests that Steven may not be familiar with the current word limit as stated by the institution. Also, the word ‘probably’ of the account (‘most supervisors probably are not interested that much in the word count’) seems to indicate Steven’s uncertainty about other academics’ perceptions of the word limit. Similarly, another academic, Jason, also stated that the institution had changed the word limit so he is not sure about what it has been set to. However, this would not bother him much as long as students do not write too much. Here, the uncertainty of members of academics appears to suggest that institutional regulation about the word limit is not their primary concern when evaluating students’ PSs or research proposals and that such a view is, in fact, similar to what I found in relation to the US-based institution, as will be discussed in Chapter 7.

6.4 Concluding points

An examination of this case study has provided evidence of contrasting expectations of the PS between the student and the academics. It highlights the point that was suggested by Lea and Street (1998) when they conducted research at two UK-based universities from academic literacies perspectives – “in practice, what makes a piece of student writing ‘appropriate’ has more to do with issues of epistemology than with the surface features of form to which academics often have recourse when describing their students’ writing. That is to say, underlying, often disciplinary, assumptions about the nature of knowledge affected the meaning given to the terms [such as] ‘structure’ and ‘argument’” (p. 162). In my context, the ‘terms’ refer to the elements that academics expect to see from the PS (e.g., motivation, relevant information). Street’s more recent account of ‘hidden literacies’ (2010) also suggests that much of what students are required to do, in writing essays or in the PS, are not made explicit but may rest on ‘hidden’ features of identity and genre of the kind I have described here.

The diverse views and understandings of the PS highlights the difficulties in its rhetorical styles, linguistic features, audience’s expectation, identities, and institutional epistemology. These factors, as I have attempted to elaborate, lead to contrasting perceptions of the PS between student writers and academics, and also amongst the academics themselves.

6.5 Summary

This chapter discussed the students' and the academics' perceptions of the PS in the focal UK-based university, drawing on student and academic interview data. Where appropriate, the analysis of the interviews has been supported by Fairclough's concept of 'identification', with reference to the categories of 'pronouns' and 'modality' to contribute to the understanding of speakers' stance when they expressed particular issues. The discussions in this chapter have also furthered the current understanding of the PS in relation to the epistemology that are associated with the key content (e.g., 'motivation', 'relevant information') that are usually considered to be included in the PS.

Through the lenses of the academic literacies perspective, this chapter reveals a more complex and contested interpretation of the PS and its relevant writing and evaluation practices, which suggests that the PS is not simply concerned with a set of technical matters, as the 'study skills' model would suggest; rather, it is associated with issues of the culture of the PhD study, the evaluation process of application, and the relationship between students and the academics, in the way 'academic socialisation' and 'academic literacies' perspectives would suggest. The following chapter investigates the PS and its associated writing and evaluation practices within the context of a US-based university. The similarities and differences concerning student and academic interpretations of the PS at these two universities will be focused upon in Chapter 8.

Chapter 7 – The writer-reader expectations of the Personal statement for the postgraduate programme application in a US-based university

In this chapter, I will investigate the writer-reader expectations and responses to the PSs for postgraduate university applications in the US-based university, with reference to 14 students and 10 academics whom I interviewed. All of these participants are from the discipline of education. The analysis procedure for these interviews will follow the same format that was used in Chapter 6, where I discussed the writer-reader expectations of the PSs for postgraduate university applications at the focal UK-based institution. At first, the thematic analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) will be adopted for the purpose of establishing themes and sub-themes that are associated with writer-reader expectations of the PS through the coding process and, where appropriate, this will lead to a closer examination of particular sections of my participants' interview accounts with reference to Fairclough's (2003) analytical concept of 'identification' to strengthen my analysis (*see* Chapter 2: section 2.3.2).

In the following sections, I will firstly present the findings drawn from the academics' data (Section 7.1) and follow that with the data from the students (Section 7.2). These two sections are organised by themes that I have identified from the thematic analysis and, where appropriate, the analysis of the speaker's 'identification' is discussed. It should be noted that the analysis based on Fairclough's notion of 'identification' will not present the same level of details as the example that I discussed in Chapter 3. However, my comments for each theme and code will embody the analytic procedures of this approach of what I have shown in detail in Chapter 3. At the end of this chapter, I also examine a telling case that illustrates the mismatches in understandings between a student and academics for the PS in US-based postgraduate university applications. In my discussion, I underline the key parts in the excerpts that I have drawn on from student and academic interview data.

7.1 Expectations of the Personal Statement: from academics' perspectives

My analysis of the academics' interview data suggests that they have fairly clear views on what are the features of a well-written PS for the doctoral study

application. This is perhaps because the academics “who review applications develop keen senses of the formal attributes of the genre and its range of permutations” (Brown, 2004, p. 242). Adopting the thematic analysis, I have assigned a number of codes from the academics’ interview data that can be categorised into two main themes. I have termed these themes as ‘content and writing in the PS’ and ‘academics’ evaluation practices of the PS’. Table 7.1 below summarises these two themes and their sub-themes:

Table 7.1 Academics’ expectations of the PS at the focal US-based institution

Themes and sub-themes

Theme 1: Content and writing in the PS

- Students’ research interests
 - a sense of identity for the student as a researcher, a scholar, and a learner
- Student’s motivation for their chosen field of study and the programme
 - relevant experience and background that contribute to student’s proposed field of study
 - the student’s knowledge of the faculty, field, and programme for which they have applied
- The PS is viewed as being like a writing sample that will allow readers to gauge a sense of the student’s writing ability

Theme 2: Academics’ evaluation practices of the PS

- The PS may only be evaluated if other preconditions have been met (e.g., pass the minimum test score)
- Individual faculty member and school-wide institutional practices

The first theme – ‘content and writing in the PS’ – focuses on what the academics expect to find when reading students’ PSs, such as content and presentation of self. The second theme – ‘academics’ evaluation practices of the PS’ – encompasses issues concerned with their evaluation practices of the PS throughout the admissions process. I will now discuss these two themes and, where appropriate, I will provide the academics’ interview data to support the discussion.

Theme 1: Content and writing in the PS

Students’ research interests

The interview responses from the academics at the focal US-based university reveal that they are most concerned with the students’ research interests. They wish to see

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whether these research interests match those that are offered within the faculty and in the programme. One of the academics stated the following:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 7.1

Ariel: I would say a seriousness of purpose and the fact that whatever they outline as their, um, interests and research goals, that it's a good match for, for the people that we have in our department, because there are some students who seem wonderful and you know they'll be very successful, but they'll probably be unhappy because their interests don't match with the program.

In Excerpt 7.1, Ariel stated that it is crucial for prospective students' research interests to match those of the 'people' in the programme. The 'people' whom she was referring to are the students and faculty members who are already in the programme. Besides Ariel, I have noticed that the academics often mentioned the 'people' and the academic events that take place in the doctoral programme when they spoke about the issue of matching research interest. As such, it can be inferred that the academics' expectations of the PS may be influenced by their consideration of the culture of the doctoral programme such as people and other academic events in the programme. I will further discuss this aspect towards the end of this section.

When speaking about students' research interest, the academics also wish to gain a sense of the 'identity' of the students. More specifically, for the doctoral study applications, the academics stated that they tend to look for a sense of a student's 'identity' as a 'researcher'. One of the academics stated as follows:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 7.2

Max: ...and so for the Ph.D. programme, for example, there's very much, um, you know, you would look for whether a student really is interested in doing research, is that something that they would like to do, and if a student says, "Jeez, I really want to come here and I want to be a practitioner," or be an administrator, that's fine, there's nothing wrong with being that, but it's like, "The Ph.D. programme is not the right programme for you," so that's another. I guess those are the sort of main criteria that would sort of immediately leap out.

In Excerpt 7.2, Max states he would like to see students that are interested in doing research at a doctoral level. He also explicitly states that if students want to become ‘practitioners’ or ‘administrators’, the Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy) programme may not be the right choice for them. Many other academics have also shared a similar view. In fact, on the official website for the university, which I investigated, it is clearly stated that the Ph.D. programme is for people who aim to build a career in academia at the university level, and that the Ed.D. (Doctor of Education) programme is for experienced professionals who wish to continue their careers as practitioners. Additionally, I have noticed that at the beginning of the interviews with the academics, most of them asked for clarification regarding questions pertaining to the level of education that was being discussed (‘we’re talking about Ph.D. programmes, right?’) as well as the type of doctoral degree (‘are we talking about Ph.D. or Ed.D.?’).

The academics’ accounts detailing their awareness of varied expectations of the PS and the need for such clarifications reveal a number of factors: different levels of education (e.g., ‘Masters’, ‘Ph.D.’) and doctoral programmes with specific objectives and orientations (e.g., ‘Ph.D.’, ‘Ed.D.’) may offer differing epistemologies that determine “what counts as knowledge and who has control over the production of that knowledge” (Lea, 2004, p. 752). With this being the case, it can be said that the academics’ perception of the specific type of approach as practitioner or as scholar that a student should present may be evoked by his consideration of what counts for the Ph.D. as opposed to the Ed.D., although such factors also tend to vary with regards to the particular discipline and academic community.

Student’s motivation for their chosen field of study and the programme

Another element that the academics expect to see is the students’ motivation for their chosen field of study and the programme. When I asked the academics about their evaluation process of the PS, one of them commented as follows:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 7.3

Max: So I think being able to sort of make a powerful argument about this is why this topic is important and deserves to be studied... I also pay attention to whether there are any particular achievements that they have been able to point out, you know, sort of things that they have done or experiences that they've had that relate to their area of interest, um, which might be, you know, interesting or important. Um, I also pay attention to, um, you know, where they see themselves going, so if this is what my interest is, here's why I see myself fitting in with New Wilson (pseudonym).

In Excerpt 7.3, Max's statements seem to connect students' motivation for their chosen field of study to their relevant experiences and background, as well as their understanding of the field and of the programme itself. Similarly, many other academics also made this connection. As such, it can be inferred that students' motivation as to why they have chosen a particular field of study, programme, and university for their doctoral study is usually inspected through the way in which students have expressed their experiences and have shown some level of understanding of the targeted programme.

The PS is viewed as being like a writing sample

The interview responses from the academics also reveal that they not only attempt to gain a picture of the students by looking at the information students have provided in their PSs, but they also pay attention to how well students can express themselves in writing. When I asked the academics about their views on the importance of the PS as compared with other parts of the application package, one of the academics responded as follows:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 7.4

Sally: I think [the PS is] the most important thing, yeah, it's the most important thing because you can tell a lot... like you can tell whether or not they can write, you can tell how... whether or not they can make a good argument, um, what's important to them, their interests, you know, all of that so that's... And I really want it to be compelling and draw me in and make me want to work with them.

In Excerpt 7.4, Sally stated that she considered the PS to be the most important piece of information in an application package as it can indicate whether students are able to express their ideas and arguments in a persuasive manner. It should also be noted that many members of academics stated that they want to see a PS featuring ‘grammatical accuracy’, ‘cohesion’, ‘clarity’, ‘thoroughness’, and ‘succinctness’. These features, which determine what is good writing, are ‘surface’ features rather than what Street (2009) has referred to in his account as ‘hidden criteria’ that are often used by those in power to assess writing in academic contexts. More specifically, Street (2009) has stressed that ‘hidden features’, such as ‘genre’, ‘audience’, and ‘voice’, which are “called upon in judgements of academic writing”, often remain implicit to student writers and are not necessarily made explicit by the academics (p. 1).

When the academics commented on their expectations of the PS, many of them not only mentioned what they expected to see when reading them, but they also connected these ideas to what they consider to be the assumptions of doctoral study and the programme. For instance, as I mentioned earlier, the academics expect to see that students’ research interests match those of the people and the programme. According to the academics, this is because doctoral students in the programme are often obliged to work on different research projects that are led by various faculty members. Also, students usually need to complete several units of coursework in the first couple of years of their doctoral study and it is usually expected that they will engage with it quite intensively. The university website concerning doctoral studies for this programme also reveals similar information. In the same vein, the reason why the academics wish to see evidence of the students’ quality of writing can be also associated with the academics’ perceptions of the nature of doctoral studies (‘required to produce a lot of writing’).

The academics’ accounts of what they expect to see in the PS echo the issues that have been highlighted in the academic literacies perspective, which emphasises literacies as social practice, and views student writing ranging from “the surface features and components of ‘writing’ in itself” to an epistemological and ideological

perspective (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 162). The discussion above indicates that the academics' expectations of the PS have been engendered by their perceptions of the assumptions of doctoral study and the programme. That is, the discipline and the programme where the academics are based have a clear influence on their "conceptualisations and representations of what were the most important elements to look for in students' writing" (ibid. p. 162). Aside from the variations of the academics' understandings of the PS that are acknowledged from disciplinary perspectives, "institutional practices, including processes of change and the exercise of power" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159), is also evident in a second theme – 'academics' evaluation practices of the PS' – which I will discuss in the following sections.

Theme 2: Academics' evaluation practices of the PS

Individual faculty member and 'school-wide' institutional practices

The interviews with the academics seem to suggest that the importance of the PS ranges from being a piece of data in the whole application process to being an important document that is crucial for selection. For instance, some faculty members consider the PS to be the most important application document; some regard it as a piece of information in the larger application package whereas some only evaluate the PS if other preconditions have been met. The reason for such variations in terms of the academics' perceptions is perhaps because of heterogeneous practices amongst the faculty members. According to the academics whom I interviewed, all of them stated that there is 'no standard criteria' for faculty members to follow when they evaluate students' applications. This process of evaluation has been called 'a clinical judgement' by one of the academics. In other words, each individual faculty member has their own approach to application evaluation and such individual evaluation practice is also in accordance with my analysis of the speakers' 'identification' by the uses of 'pronouns' and 'modality'. Specifically, I have noticed that most of the academics used more 'I-statements' than 'we-statements' when they talked about their own reasons and criteria for focusing on different parts of the application package. Such choices in 'pronouns' have revealed a sense of 'individuality' rather than a form of 'collectivity' (Fairclough, 2003), meaning that their perceptions on different parts of the application document may not be generalised as being the

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viewpoint of the entire faculty. The academics' choices in 'modality' (e.g., 'can', 'will') also appear to suggest their strong degree of commitment to their propositions. One of the examples from the academics is as follows. When I asked Christine about her views on the most important application document, she responded:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 7.5

Christine: Hmmm. That's hard 'cause I think it's for different purposes. You know, I have to say this is a... I want to be really clear about this. This is an indiv... whatever I respond... however I respond...is really individual to me. Okay. I can't speak for my colleagues.

In Excerpt 7.5, she appeared hesitant in her response. More specifically, before she expressed her views, she stated that her response to my question can only be attributed to her. This statement may be associated with Christine's process of 'identification' in terms of the relationship between her and other faculty members, and between her and me as a researcher because Christine's "texturing of [her] identity is thoroughly embedded in the texturing of social relations" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 166). On the one hand, Christine's cautiousness when she tried to provide her views on the application document can be understood as her awareness that she is a member of the leading faculty that takes charge of admissions processes. As such, she may be aware of the moral responsibility that she holds. Her statement also seems to imply her acknowledgment of varied voices and views amongst the faculty. On the other hand, the fact that she was being interviewed by a researcher who was collecting data for a thesis and awareness of the fact that this information would be used as data, may have left her feeling cautious about her responses to my questions; therefore, she responded with a sense of 'individuality' rather than 'collectivity' (Fairclough, 2003).

Christine's self-consciousness when it came to answering my question is also particularly clear in terms of the choices in 'modality' used as it is concerned with "what authors *commit* themselves to, with respect to what is true and what is

necessary” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 164). Christine used a marker of modalisation ‘*can’t*’ (as underlined in Excerpt 7.5) to reveal her strong commitment to her intended meaning (‘I can’t speak for my colleagues’). She might have said: ‘I *could not* speak for my colleagues’ or ‘I *may not* speak for my colleagues’, or ‘I *should not* speak for my colleagues’. What Christine stated commits her to the truth of the proposition more than any of these alternatives shown above. This appears to be the case in that she is taking a safe approach to avoid unnecessary confrontation or conflict with the views of others. In her preceding responses to my questions, her sense of ‘identification’ is obvious in her uses of ‘first person statements’ (‘I’, ‘my’, ‘me’). These statements would be different if she used the ‘collectivity’ form (‘we’, ‘our’, ‘us’) to align herself with the other faculty members and such linguistic expressions may indicate relatively less authority on the speaker’s part. Christine’s choices in ‘modality’ and ‘pronouns’ signal her “process of identifying herself” (ibid. p. 159) when she constructed her intended meanings in relation to a particular topic.

It is important to note that when the academics talked about their individual evaluation practices, they also expressed the constraints that are imposed by a ‘school-wide committee’ (term quoted from the academic interview). This may be because, according to the academics, both leading faculty members for the programme and representatives of the school-wide committee are usually involved in the admissions process. Such a situation found in the focal US-based institution does not occur at the focal UK-based institution. The academics stated that the competitive nature of admissions for a particular programme is evident each year (around 70 applications for a particularly programme whereas it may be 150 applications for another programme); however, there are only a few slots for admissions (around 3 - 5 slots per programme). Many pointed out that there are many stages in the admissions process.

During the initial stage of the admissions processes, all the academics who take charge of admissions need to review each application individually and come up with a list for the top set of applicants from each tutor (a list of the top ten choices in general). At the second stage, the academics in the programme need to aggregate

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together to discuss their individual lists and negotiate with their colleagues' preferences to come up with a 'single' list of approximately six names and this list will be passed on to the school-wide committee for the next level of evaluation.

Based on the interviews with the academics, it appears to be the case that some tension exists between individual faculty members' practices and those at the school-wide level during the admissions processes. This is perhaps because the faculty in the programme and the people at the school-wide committee have varied priorities and considerations when evaluating the applications. For instance, some academics have pointed out that the PS is the most important piece of data as compared with other parts of the application (e.g., 'test scores', 'recommendation letters') because it provides information about the students' research interests and such a piece of information is the one they are concerned with the most ('the issue of 'fit'). However, according to the academics, in comparison to their perspective, it appears that the school-wide committee places a higher value on the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) scores. The GRE is a standardised test and a standard requirement for admission into many graduate schools across the United States. As such, despite the fact that the academics have identified a number of students whose research interests would be well suited to the programme and the faculty from reading students' PSs, if students' GRE score is not high enough, they may not be accepted onto the course when their application goes through an evaluation process that is overseen by the school-wide committee. One of the academics stated as follows:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 7.6

01 Vicky: Um, and there's also a very strong mandate... I didn't mention this but
02 increasingly, out of the central office, the Dean, even I guess the University of
03 New Wilson (pseudonym) provost, there's a lot of... er, there's more emphasis
04 on the GRE than we used to... we as faculty used to kind of consider that as one
05 piece of the picture but now they're really pretty much disqualifying anybody
06 below, let's say, what is it, 1100 I think. So a combined verbal and math score
07 of 1100 and above, we do look at for sure. We look at those files. And then those
08 that have 1100 or below, we look much less in depth. Because we realise that
09 it's... in fact a few years ago I did put forth one name that had about, I think a

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10 total of 600, because he had other strengths, but I could not make any
11 headway... with the, you know, central administration on the validity of
12 admitting him. And since we have so many, er, qualified applicants above the
13 1100 range, it just didn't seem worth, you know, trying to fight that battle. So I
14 will confess that at this point we pretty much, you know, I pretty much
15 concentrate on those that are above 1100 and that's usually maybe 50 out of the
16 70.

In Excerpt 7.6, numerous inclusive personal pronouns ('we') were used in Vicky's statements (lines 04, 07, 08, and 12) when she discussed the role of the GRE score during the admissions process. However, it is also important to note here that the speaker's shifts in the use of personal pronoun reveals her process of identifying herself and her consideration of being identified by the other faculty members in the programme (Fairclough, 2003). For example, Vicky used the inclusive form 'we' when discussing the situation in the past, concerning the perception of the GRE (line 04). However, in line 05, the personal pronoun 'they' is used to refer to the practice executed by the school-wide committee, which differs from the practices across the faculty. The use of 'we' again in line 07 ('so a combined verbal and math score of 1100 and above, *we* do look at for sure') seems to indicate that the faculty members' evaluation practices ('collectivity') have been influenced and constrained by the regulation imposed by the school-wide committee. In the same fashion, I have noticed that many other academics shifted their uses of 'pronouns' from 'I-statements' when talking about their individual practices to 'we-statements' when stating the influence from the school-wide committee during the admissions process.

In lines 09 – 12, Vicky provided one of her experiences of fighting for a student whose GRE was low ('a total of 600') but failing to secure a place for the student when she negotiated with the school-wide committee. The example Vicky provided appears to legitimise the strict regulation imposed by the school and imply a certain 'power' issue during the admissions process. In other words, the faculty members seem to have less leeway with whom they want to accept. These instances seem to reinforce the view of the academic literacies perspective that "the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 159).

Despite the fact that most of the academics whom I interviewed expressed their views on the PS, two of them from a group of ten have pointed out that they do not know how to evaluate the PS without being given other parts of the application document to also look over. Interestingly, these two academics are from the same programme where, according to them, the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) score is highly valued over the rest of the application document. One of the academics stated as follows:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 7.7

Roy: The screening process depends heavily on the GRE scores and for us high quantitative scores are essential. Good verbal scores are desirable... so we rely on both but the quantitative is weighted more ...Yeah, GRE is the first cut. If the scores are too low we don't bother going any further... 'cause the kid is just not going to survive.

In Excerpt 7.7, Roy's statement suggests that in the case of the programme where he is based, it is clear that if the students' GRE scores are too low, their PSs may not even be evaluated in the admissions process. In other words, the PS may only be read under the condition in which the GRE score has passed the minimum requirement. Such a viewpoint of GRE score is different from the views of the academics from the other programme that the GRE score is not considered a good indicator of student suitability for the doctoral study. This phenomenon seems to reinforce the views expressed by Lea and Street (2006) that "the literacy practices of academic disciplines can be viewed as varied social practices associated with different communities" (p. 368).

7.2 Expectations of the Personal Statement: from students' perspectives

My analysis of the students' interview data has revealed a number of different interpretations and understandings of how they approach their PSs. The codes that I have applied to the students' interview data through the inductive coding approach can be related to broader themes – 'content and writing of the PS'. It is important to note that although the name for this theme is similar to that of the academics'

interview data, the sub-themes under each may vary. The analysis of ‘pronouns’ and ‘modality’ will be detailed where necessary. Table 7.2 below summarises the theme and sub-themes that relate to the students’ expectations of the PS:

Table 7.2 Students’ expectations of the PS at the focal US-based institution	
Themes and sub-themes	
Theme: Content and writing in the PS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research interests <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the applicant’s (envisioned) self-identity as a student, researcher, and scholar • Their motivation for a proposed field of study and programme <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - their previous experiences and background that are relevant to the proposed field of study - some level of understanding concerning the faculty, field, and programme • Good quality of writing • Some personal characteristics that may be considered as favourable features by the academics 	

Theme: Content and writing in the PS

Research interests and motivation for a proposed field of study and programme

Most of the students stated that they wished to convey their research interests and also address their motivation for pursuing a doctoral degree in a particular field of study and programme. When I asked the students about their views on what is the most important content to include in their PSs, one of them stated as follows:

Student’s interview

Excerpt 7.8

Kevin: ...what I wanted to do was I wanted to, you know, give an idea of why it is that I’m applying to a school of education, why it is I want to pursue a Ph.D. in Education. I thought that that was important. Um, the other thing I wanted to do was express what in particular I’m interested in studying and then, beyond that, I wanted to, you know, explain why I thought that New Wilson (pseudonym) would be the best place for me to study these things, you know, in which I’m interested.

Many other students have shared a similar view to that of Kevin. As for offering the academics a sense of their motivation for their proposed field of study, most of these student participants referred to their relevant experiences and background. They also revealed how these experiences and background would contribute to their academic

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development and their research interest. The interviews with the students also suggest that they wanted to convince the academics that they possessed the identity of a committed student, a researcher, and a scholar. When I asked the students about the content of their PSs, one of them commented as follows:

Student's interview

Excerpt 7.9

Samantha: What I want to do, why I want to do it, my goals, um, with whom, so I put specifically people I admired at that university and, um, how I kind of envisioned myself as a researcher, since I applied to research institutions, and how I envisioned myself as a student and a scholar. Um, and kind of demonstrating how I, how I had those qualities, and not just saying, "I'm a hard worker." Like really showing my past work, what I, what I had done so far.

In Excerpt 7.9, Samantha expressed the importance of portraying her 'envisioned' identity as a 'researcher', a 'student', and a 'scholar'. The use of the word 'envision' in her statements appears to suggest something that has been imagined and is expected to become a reality in the future. More specifically, this word indicates her position as an applicant who has not yet entered the targeted academic community. In light of this, Samantha attempted to predict the future in the hope that she would be accepted into the doctoral programme. Samantha's consideration of showing her 'envisioned identity' is perhaps related to her perceptions of what she thought the academics wished to see when reading the PS.

In terms of the way in which the students revealed their motivation for choosing a particular programme and university, many of them mentioned that they stated the names of particular faculty members in their PSs as evidence that they had carried out some research about the specialties of the faculty. One of the students stated as follows:

Student's interview

Excerpt 7.10

Joseph: I did look at the website; I looked at some of the faculty members' publications just to give myself a better foundational knowledge of the work that they do because I, in my statement I did tie

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in each faculty member and sort of, um, gave evidence that my interests and work would complement theirs in some way.

In Excerpt 7.10, Joseph referred to his efforts to understand the work of the people who are associated with the targeted programme and this was because he intended to make a connection between his research interests and those of the targeted academic community. Many other students had also adopted this approach to make such a connection with the people in the targeted academic community.

Good quality of writing

Almost all my student participants stated that a well-written PS is crucial in the sense that it allows them to demonstrate to the academics they can write in a specific and coherent fashion. One of the students commented as follows:

Student's interview

Excerpt 7.11

Kevin: ... the writing sample is important and, you know, because, er, so much of what we do is going to be based on our writing. I mean I guess that the personal statement... another factor that, um, that the personal statement contributes to is some indicator of, you know, your ability to write.

Similarly to Kevin, many other students also stated that an ability to write competently shows their potential for studying and completing a doctoral degree. As such, they wish to produce a 'clear', 'specific', 'cohesive', and 'succinct' PS that will leave a good impression of their writing ability. In other words, the students attempted to communicate their ideas in a way that would fit in with what the academics consider to be academic writing.

Personal characteristics

The other salient sub-theme that emerges from the students' interview data is that most of them stated that they wanted to reveal their 'personal characteristics' in their PSs. One of the students stated as follows:

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Student's interview

Excerpt 7.12

William: I think the message just that I was looking to send was one of, um, dedication and ingenuity as well as looseness. I didn't want to seem very, um, rigid in this. I tried... I wanted to use vernacular and maybe a little bit of humour to... to show that I am a loose person and not a pain in the ass to work with.

In Excerpt 7.12, William revealed the personal characteristics ('dedication', 'ingenuity', 'looseness') that he wanted to show to the academics. In terms of the element of 'looseness', William stated that he used 'vernacular' terms and 'humour' to achieve this aim. He also stated that the reason for delivering a sense of 'looseness' to the academics is to make them sense he is a person who is pleasant to work with.

Similarly, the other students also wanted the academics to gain a sense of their 'personality' as individuals who are 'hard-working', 'ambitious', 'determined' and 'passionate' about doing research. They also wished to present themselves as people who are 'intellectually inquisitive' about many things and such a characteristic, from the students' perspectives, may indicate a sense of their 'broad-mindedness', as opposed to a 'dogmatic' quality, to explore different perspectives of the research topic. The students' reasons for expressing these 'personal characteristics' can be also associated with their consideration of the culture of the doctoral study and of the academics' expectations regarding what may be counted as a favourable quality in the targeted programme.

Although the discussion above reveals that some perceptions of the PS between the students and the academics are similar (e.g., 'research interests', 'motivation for the study'), most of the students stated that what made the PS challenging for them was trying to figure out what information to include and what not to include. They also needed to find ways of making specific information stand out, meeting with what they believe to be the academics' expectation when viewing the PS, and achieving this task within the specified word limit. The students' awareness of the content and audience expectations appears to illustrate their view that the PS writing entails an

element of ‘gamesmanship’ as the applicants are trying to figure out what the academics would want to read and then tailor their materials to meet those expectations throughout the application process. One of the students described how he shaped his PS according to his understanding of the targeted academic community and potential readers of his PS:

Student’s interview

Excerpt 7.13

Joseph: ...I also definitely put in my personal statement that I wanted to be a faculty member when I left because I’d been told that you have to do that or else you don’t get in. I didn’t know at the time whether I wanted to be a faculty member or not – I still don’t know that – and once you get in you can sort of ‘ha-ha’ talk about it, say, “I’m not sure what I want to do,” but it’s like, almost like a, if you say, “I don’t want to be a faculty member,” or “I’m not sure,” it’s almost like you get axed like instantly. This is what I’ve been told, I don’t know any specific examples of this.

In Excerpt 7.13, Joseph’s statements clearly illustrate his consideration of what his potential audiences may want to see when reading his PS. He revealed that he had gained information from a source regarding the commitment to become a faculty member at this institution after the completion of their doctoral studies and that this appears to appeal to the academics. Joseph took this information on board despite the fact that he was not sure whether he would want to become a faculty member following the completion of his course, and yet he still included this statement. This can be seen as one of the cases in which students attempt to include things that they think might meet the academics’ expectations even if the statements they offer are not a genuine self-reflection. As such, the process of completing the PS can be a real challenge for students who wish to offer a genuine self-portrait but will also write information that the academics would want to read. Because of the imbalance of knowledge concerning the PS between students and academics, many students may struggle with the difficulties of the ‘opaque’ nature of this particular text type. One of my student participants’ statements illustrates such an issue well:

Student's interview

Excerpt 7.14

Samantha: You have no idea, like you don't know what they're looking for. I think a lot of times you want... there to be just a specific thing they're looking for and you can't control that because you can't control exactly what they're looking for one year to the next, um, or what the other applicants are like... but like really when I was writing it, like it's hard not to get, um, caught up in other people's expectations, so you try... or like I tried really hard to match what I thought people might want, but at the same time I had to understand like I really have no control over that. Um, I can only try my best to be honest and present myself, um, the way that I want to be seen, but how they actually see me and how they actually read it, no idea, ...I think that's the thing that actually scares me about statements of purpose.

7.3 Writer-reader contrasting expectations and interpretations of the Personal Statement

In sections 7.1 and 7.2, I have discussed the expectations and understandings of the PS from the perspectives of the academics and students. In this section, I will draw upon a PS written by a Chinese student (Tommy) who applied for a postgraduate university course in the US. The interview data in which Tommy discussed his writing practices and the academics' comments on his PS will be used for discussion in this section. The analyses for this case study will draw upon Fairclough's analytical concept of 'identification', which I have described in Chapter 2. Furthermore, where appropriate, I will also make reference to the academic literacies perspective that has been proposed by Lea and Street (1998). This case study illustrates contrasting writer-reader expectations and interpretations in reference to a paragraph written by Tommy for his PS. The student's paragraph is as follows:

Tommy's PS

Excerpt 7.15

The words from the movie "Dead Poets Society", spoken by Dr. Keating (played by Robin Williams), "We all have a great need for acceptance. But you must trust that your beliefs are unique, your own. You need to strive for your own voice because the later you start, the less likely you will find it at all. Two roads diverged in a wood and I, I

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took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference”, resonated deeply within me.

Excerpt 7.15 was taken from the second paragraph of Tommy’s PS. In this excerpt, Tommy used the quote of an actor in the film ‘Dead Poets Society’, which helped him to convey his own thoughts. The following provides Tommy’s comments on this paragraph:

Tommy’s comments on his PS

Excerpt 7.16

Why I used the, the movie Dead Poets Society. Because I... first because I loved the movie so much and watched it lots of times and it was a movie about education, about how to, how you educate the students, how to educate the children. I think that’s how the, the most important, important symbol of education is to, er, to make the students know they have the abilities to chase their dreams and to shape their future. That’s my motivation about education comes from this film.

In Excerpt 7.16, Tommy explained that the reason he used this particular quote is because he enjoyed watching the film a lot. ‘Dead Poets Society’ tells the story of an English teacher who inspires his students to change their lives through his way of teaching. Tommy’s statements suggest he aligns himself with the philosophy of education that was depicted in the film. In fact, before Tommy used the quote from this film in the second paragraph of his PS, he used the first paragraph to discuss the educational system in China (‘the tremendous weight placed on test-taking’) where he stated that this system puts students under huge pressure and leaves them ‘fearful of being themselves’ (see Appendix 14 for the full version of Tommy’s PS). Because of his experiences in education in China, Tommy said that he developed his interests in the policy issue related to education reform and other related issues. As such, the film’s quote (‘*we all have a great need for acceptance. But you must trust that your beliefs are unique...*’) appears to well express his passion and beliefs concerning what education should be. This viewpoint is in direct contrast to the educational practices that he associates with China.

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Tommy's process of identifying himself and his consideration of being identified ('identification') by the academics is realised by his use of 'quotes' from the film (Tommy's way of doing something). More specifically, Tommy is identifying himself as a person who has strong 'motivation' and 'passion' for education and such a personal characteristic is something he wants to convey to the academics. However, Tommy's attempt to show his 'passion' and 'motivation' for education with the use of the film quote was not recognised by the academics. One of the academics commented as follows:

Academic's comments

Excerpt 7.17

Allen: I also thought it was really, really bad to be citing the movie. We like primary sources... this is a second-hand... or third! (laughs) So they didn't seem, you know, it seemed cute. But we're not about cute, we're about scholarship. So... already by, already by paragraph one I say to myself, "where is this going?"

In Excerpt 7.17, Allen stated it was 'bad to be citing the movie', and that the quote was 'not first source'. He also stated that the use of the film quote was considered to be 'cute', but it is not about the 'scholarship'. These comments seem to suggest what the conventions are for referencing in academic texts. Here, I would suggest that the explanation for such a divergence of opinion may lie "at a deeper level than the surface features of writing" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 165). More specifically, the reason for this contrasting view may be due to the student's lack of familiarity with the 'hidden features' in academic writing, such as 'genre' as suggested in Street's (2009) accounts of what may be involved with regards to the writing requirements. In other words, the academics may wish to see how the student presents himself by using an 'intellectual style' that is the accepted norm within this community. For this reason, it can be said that images of 'cuteness' rather than 'scholarship' may be engendered by the academic's perception that a film quote is not considered to be a relevant type of academic source.

In fact, some of the other academics stated that a PS should focus primarily on an academic aspect, thus implying there is a 'genre' for this particular type of text and

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such a ‘hidden feature’ (Street, 2009) may not be transparent to applicants as they have only been informed of what content to include in their PSs but have not been told what ‘style’ and ‘voice’ would best meet their audiences’ expectations. As such, despite the fact that Tommy’s assumption regarding the need to present strong motivation and passion for his proposed field of study does match up with what the academics have stated as their concerns, the ways in which Tommy expressed himself may not successfully communicate his intention. Such a mismatch reveals the complex meaning-making process that involves “the production of the text, the text itself, and the reception of the text” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 10).

Also, when commenting on Tommy’s PS, the academics appear to be aware of distinctive ways of writing. One of the academics commented as follows:

Academic’s comments

Excerpt 7.18

Roy: ... there’re some idiosyncrasies, peculiarities that are common in... that occur when people apply from the different countries. One peculiarity here is the quotation from a movie. I happen not to, unless the dialogue of movie is really good ... it’s like the sayings of Confucius. Well, I’d rather hear Confucius actually than Robin Williams but that’s another matter. So it doesn’t make it... it’s not going to hurt the student to have it in there but it doesn’t help much either. It’s actually a little bit of a distraction, especially if I don’t know who Robin Williams is, or I’ve never seen the Dead Poets Society.

In Excerpt 7.18, Roy’s statement suggests that the use of film quote is a ‘peculiar’ way of writing in the PSs. The use of a film quote made Roy feel that there are different ways of writing that may be related to the students’ countries of origin. The diverse views of the student and the academics may strengthen the argument that literacy practices have their own meanings that are rooted in a particular sociocultural context and embedded in “socially constructed epistemological principles” (Street, 2003, p. 77). In other words, Tommy’s use of a film quote is perhaps the result of an influence by his sociocultural background. As a Chinese person, Tommy may have felt it is natural and acceptable to borrow quotes from

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various resources to help construct arguments. However, from the academics' points of view, this may be 'undesirable' and 'idiosyncratic'. Such a mismatch reinforces the view proposed by Street (2003) that literacy is always "contested, both its meanings and its practices" because literacy practices vary from one context to another (p. 78).

Despite the fact that the academics did not like the use of film quotes, the use of quotes from people in the academic field of study appears to be acceptable. For instance, Tommy quoted some words from a statistician in his PS. One of the academics from the programme that highly emphasises a prerequisite for mathematics and statistics commented that he sensed that the student knew something about statistics because the name that Tommy quoted is recognisable in the field. By contrast, quotes from the film 'Dead Poets Society' may not be known to the academics and may even prove to be a hindrance ('it's actually a little bit of a distraction, especially if I don't know who Robin Williams is, or I've never seen the Dead Poets Society', *see* Excerpt 7.18). Based on these discussions, it can be said that the use of quotations may be effective in a case in which the student has met the "members' resources" that "[academics] have in their heads and draw upon when [they interpret texts] – including their knowledge of language, representations of the natural and social worlds they inhabit, values, beliefs, assumptions, and so on" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 20).

My examination of a case study draws attention to the diversity of writer-reader views of the PS and I have highlighted the complexities in its rhetorical styles, linguistic realisations, the writer's identities, and the audiences' expectations. My analysis also strengthens the idea proposed by Lea and Street (1998) that "what makes a piece of student writing 'appropriate' has more to do with issues of epistemology than with the surface features of form" (p. 162). As I have discussed earlier, the use of film quotes is associated with the student's process of identifying himself as well as his wish to be identified as a person who has strong motivation and passion toward education by the academics. However, when the text was evaluated by the academics, the student's 'identification' would only be established by what he had written in his PS, meaning that the ways in which the student

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delivered his intended meaning may have affected the academics' perceptions when reading this document. In other words, the linguistic realisations in identification may (*or* may not) have engendered contrasting messages between what the student had intended to deliver and what was perceived by the academics upon reading his PS. Despite the fact that this assumption ('showing one's motivation and passion') was shared by the student and the academics in my case study, it is clear that the contrasting expectations of the student and academics remain a complex issue in terms of what is constructed as a desirable style of writing in the admissions discourses.

7.4 Summary

The discussion in this chapter contributes to the understanding of the assumptions of the PS from students' and academics' perspectives at the focal US-based institution. The discussion also draws attention to the academic literacies perspective (Lea & Street, 1998) to student writing. The analyses of the academics' interview data reveal the complexities of the PS evaluation during the admissions process in its relation to the issues of academics' consideration of the doctoral study and of the culture of the programme, and the tension due to institutional constraints at the school-wide level. Analyses of the students' interview data suggest that their interpretations of the PS are influenced by their consideration of the targeted academic programme and resources that are available for them during their writing process. I also examined a telling case to illustrate the complexities of writing and evaluation practices of the PSs by the student and academics at the focal US-based university.

Chapter 8 – Literacies practices that are associated with the Personal Statement across the two universities

In Chapters 6 and 7, I have examined writer-reader expectations and interpretations of the PS that forms an integral part of the postgraduate programme applications for the focal UK-based and US-based universities, with reference to the views of students and academics from the departments of education. In this chapter, I aim to investigate literacy practices of the PS across institutional contexts that contribute towards an institutional understanding of literacy practices associated with the PS at both institutions. In order to achieve this aim, I draw upon the emergent themes that I have reached through the thematic analysis in Chapters 6 and 7 concerning interpretations and perceptions of the PS between the students and academics, and also compare and contrast the similarities and differences of these themes in relation to students' and the academics' understandings of the PS at the two universities.

What is perhaps more important and different about this chapter from Chapters 6 and 7 is that this chapter attempts to unpack the effects that epistemology may have to influence the literacy practices associated with the PS in both institutional contexts. Specifically, I draw on the perspective of academic literacies proposed by Lea and Street (1998), as outlined in Chapter 2, which pays attention to assumptions about the nature of knowledge that influence the meaning given to the descriptive terms such as 'structure' and 'argument' that are used often by academics to describe student academic writing, as shown in Lea and Street's study. They have found divergence of perceptions in relation to these descriptive terms and the explanation for the contrasting views of the academics towards these terms lies at a deeper level rather than surface textual features (*ibid.*). Lea and Street (1998) have argued that as the assumptions vary according to the contexts, "it is not valid to suggest that such concepts are generic and transferable, or represent common sense ways of knowing" (p. 162). In line with this idea, my discussion in this chapter attempts to compare and contrast the themes that are shown in Chapters 6 and 7 concerning the students' and academics' assumptions about the PS at the two universities. In my discussion, where necessary, I also draw on the three perspectives – study skills, academic socialisation, and academic literacies – that are proposed by Lea and Street (1998) as

ways of looking at student writing. In the following discussions, I begin by comparing and contrasting the academics' expectations of the PS across the two institutional contexts and then proceed to do the same for the students' assumptions.

8.1 Perspectives of the academics across two institutional contexts

This section discusses the academics' expectations and perceptions in relation to the PS across the two universities respectively in the UK and US. Table 8.1 below summarises the common and different themes between the academics' expectations of the PS for the postgraduate study application in the field of education across the two universities. Here, it should be noted that although I have categorised the themes derived from the two universities into 'common' and 'different' themes, it does not mean that the aspects of epistemology that gives meaning to these themes are in concordance. In other words, these themes may be associated with aspects such as the nature/structure of the PhD study, institutional practices, and the structure of the application/admissions process. I will discuss these themes in relation to the relevant literacy practices in the following sections.

Table 8.1 Academics' expectations of the PS across two universities

Common themes	
<i>Content and writing in the PS</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Motivation for the student's chosen field of study and the programme ('reasons for applying') - Relevant experiences and backgrounds that contribute to students' proposed field of study 	
<i>The evaluation practices of the PS</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No particular institutional criteria on document evaluation - Different evaluation practices of application document across the faculty ('impressionistic judgement') 	
Different themes	
<i>Content and writing in the PS</i>	
Research interest	<u>UK-based university</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Look for student's research interest from the research proposal, not from the Personal Statement - The research interest needs to match particular academics
	<u>US-based university</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Look for student's research interest from the Personal Statement - The research interest usually needs to match the programme and the people in general
Writing sample to gauge student written ability	<u>UK-based university</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gauge student's writing ability from the research proposal, not from the Personal Statement
	<u>US-based university</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Personal Statement is crucial for identifying student's writing ability
<i>The evaluation practices applied to the PS</i>	
Preconditioned factors	<u>UK-based university</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Personal Statement as supplementary evidence for the research proposal
	<u>US-based university</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Personal Statement may only be evaluated if a precondition has been satisfied (e.g., pass the minimum Graduate Record Examinations score)
Individual faculty member vs. institutional practices	<u>UK-based university</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are usually no institutional practices involved during the admissions process
	<u>US-based university</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tension between the practices of an individual faculty member in the department and those of the people in the school-wide committee

As can be seen in Table 8.1 above, a comparison of themes with reference to the academics' interviews at the two universities reveals more discrepancies than similarities. I begin with an examination of the similarities and then focus on the

discrepancies across the two universities. In terms of the content of the PS, the academics at both universities hope to see students' motivation for their proposed field of study and evidence of their relevant experiences and backgrounds in support of their applications. This finding is in accordance with some of the categories that have been revealed in earlier move-step genre studies of the PS, as I have shown in Chapter 1 (Bekins et al., 2004; Monk, 2004; Samraj & Monk, 2008). For instance, Samraj and Monk (2008) have identified two obligatory rhetorical moves: the 'background' allows for "the writer to portray his or her expertise and experience and hence suitability for the programme", and 'reasons for applying' to a specific programme (p. 200). Such assumptions that have been made by the academics at both universities and have been shown in previous studies may not be uncommon since both categories are prominent features of this type of text (Samraj & Monk, 2008). What is perhaps more interesting is how these categories are associated with the academics' consideration of epistemology in their discourse community. As I have discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, the interviews with the academics have revealed that their perceptions of the PS are associated with their consideration of the nature of doctoral studies in the programme. More specifically, according to the academics, PhD study requires commitment to research, which will be conducted over a lengthy period of time ('PhD is a long-term commitment'). The academics, therefore, will be eager to gain an understanding of students' motivation and their previous experiences that such types of information would help them to judge a student's level of preparation for success in their doctoral studies.

In relation to the evaluation practices of the PS, the academics at both universities have indicated that there is no written official checklist for academics to follow throughout the evaluation process. The academics have claimed that the process of evaluating the PS as well as the other parts of the application document is based on their 'impressionistic' or 'clinical' judgement, meaning that evaluation practices for the application document may vary from one academic to another in the same department ('intradepartmental variation', *see* the discussions in Chapters 6 and 7). However, it should be noted that despite the fact that each faculty has stated that they follow their own individual criteria for examining the application document because there is no officially documented institutional criterion, my findings suggest that the

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academics in the same programmes or different ones may have shared similar perspectives in terms of what they expect to see from reading students' PSs (emphasis on 'content' of the PS). For instance, as I have discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, the academics would like to see students' 'motivation' and 'relevant experiences for their proposed field of study'. The explanation for this phenomenon may be a result of the effect of the nature of the PhD study that academics as insiders at this level of study may share.

Despite the fact that the academics have shared some assumptions about evaluating the PS across these two universities, a number of differences between academics in the UK-based and the US-based university have been found concerning the academics' interpretations of the PS (*see* Table 8.1 for a summary).

In a comparison of both universities, a couple of themes emerged from the academics' interview data at one of the institutions, but they were absent from the other. Firstly, in relation to what the academics expect to see when reading student's PS, the theme of 'research interest' is referred to by those at the US-based university, but it appears that no references are made in the statements of the academics at the focal UK-based university. The reason for this variation may be due to differences in the documentation that supports an application for both contexts. More specifically, in the British context, two written PSs – the research proposal and PS – are usually required for a doctoral application. According to the academics at the focal UK-based university, they normally look for information about the students' research interests by reading students' research proposals rather than their PSs. This may explain why the theme of 'research interest' was absent in the UK academics' accounts when they talked about the PS. Unlike the British context, postgraduate study applications in the US usually require only a PS, which indicates the students' motivation for doctoral study as well as their research interest, relevant personal experiences and other significant information. The academics at US-based universities thus tend to try to take account of the students' research interests whilst looking over the PS.

Although the theme of ‘research interest’ is absent from the UK academics’ accounts of their expectations of the PS, it should also be noted that the issue of ‘research interest’ is, in fact, heavily stressed by the UK academics when they expressed their views of the research proposal. From this perspective, it seems that the academics at both universities hope to take account of the information concerning student’s research interest during the admissions process. However, what should be noticed here is that the discourse community’s practices that are associated with the issue of ‘research interest’ for admissions are varied across the institutional contexts. For instance, for the focal UK-based institution, the academics hope to ensure student’s research interest match with those of the academics. While the academics at the focal US-based university also consider the importance of research match, unlike the UK-based university, they usually consider it in terms of the people and programme in a general sense rather than in relation to specific academics/supervisors. Such a variation may be associated with the structure of the doctoral studies, in the way the academic literacies perspective would suggest (Lea & Street, 1998). More specifically, according to the academics at the focal UK-based university, the concern of research match for the postgraduate study application is usually associated with compatibility that would allow academics to become a student’s supervisors. It is also commonly the case that as soon as students get accepted into the doctoral programme of study, they will be expected to work on their individual research project and will have a close working relationship with their supervisors.

In comparison to the British context, doctoral students at US-based universities are not expected to conduct their independent research project as soon as they begin a course of study. Rather, they usually need to undertake a number of course units in the first couple of years and work with faculty members on their research projects (‘research apprenticeships’ – term quoted from academic interview). As such, doctoral students in the US are unlikely to choose their supervisors and begin their individual research project until they have (*or* nearly) finished the courses and research training offered in the programme in the first 2-3 years of their PhD studies. For these reasons, the US-based postgraduate study application normally considers the research match between prospective students and the people and programme in

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general, rather than matching the student's research interest with that of potential academics/supervisors.

Secondly, the theme of 'the PS serves as a writing sample to gauge student written ability' can be found in the US academics' interview data but this is not the case in the UK academics' data with regards to discussions of the PS. This is perhaps again associated with the fact that there are different requirements for postgraduate study application across these two institutions. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, the PS is usually the only written document that is required for a postgraduate university application in the US, but a UK application usually requires evidence of the research proposal and the PS. For this reason, it is normal for the academics at the US-based university to gauge students' writing ability from a reading of their PSs. In contrast, according to most of the academics at the UK-based university, the research proposal is the most important document in the admissions process (*see* discussions on the theme – 'the PS to be a supplementary document of the research proposal' in Chapter 6). In light of this, the academics at the UK-based university usually look for evidence of the students' ability for writing when reading through their research proposal, rather than the PS.

Thirdly, from the perspective of evaluation practices of the PS, the academics' interviews at both universities have shown that there are different 'preconditioned factors' that may influence the way in which the academics approach the PS. For instance, the UK academics' interviews indicate that they consider the PS to be a supplementary document for the research proposal. More specifically, the PS is usually considered to be useful, but if a student's research proposal is weak, then the PS is often of no interest to them. As such, it can be inferred that the PS may be less valuable in certain situations, especially in comparison to the research proposal in this case. Such a theme may also be associated with what I have discussed earlier as 'the structure of the PhD study' at the UK-based university as students will have to engage in their individual PhD project as soon as they get into the programme. From this perspective, it is reasonable to infer that the academics may want to gain more specific ideas concerning what students want to do for their PhD through reading their research proposals.

In the US case, the preconditioned factor is probably associated with the GRE score rather than to the research proposal that is crucial: the academics have addressed the tension between individual faculty members' practices and those at a 'school-wide' level throughout the admissions processes, especially when they referred to the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) score that is highly valued by the institution. Because of the institution's great emphasis on the GRE score, despite students having a strong PS, if their GRE score is not high enough, it is possible that they will not be considered for admission when it goes to the second stage of evaluation that is conducted by the school-wide committee. According to the academics, the emphasis on the GRE score by the institution where they are based is related to the institutional consideration of maintaining the university rank as GRE serves one of the aspects that is chosen for gauging the quality of the institution. The discussion in this paragraph appears to reinforce what Samraj and Monk (2008) have stated that "the role of the statement may not be as straightforward in the application process to [some] programmes of study" because the other parts of the application document also need to be taken into consideration (p. 199).

Finally, it is interesting to note that the academics at the focal UK-based university appear to possess more power in terms of their evaluation practices of the application document; however, at the focal US-based university, most of the academics stated that they feel a certain tension between the practices of faculty members and those that are endorsed by the school-wide committee. Such a variation perhaps results from different admissions procedures across these two institutions. For instance, it is generally known that the academics at the UK-based institution have the power to determine which students will be accepted and which will be rejected for the PhD studies. This is perhaps because the key element for PhD applications in the UK is to ensure students' research interests match up with the specialism of potential supervisors rather than with people and the programme in general. The academics at the UK-based university have also stated that it is impossible for the institution to evaluate student's suitability for the course of study as the institution does not know about all the specialities of potential supervisors and hence could not judge whether students' research interests match with those of the academics/supervisors.

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In contrast, the admissions evaluation process for the postgraduate study application in the US usually involves different stages with different groups of people. As I have discussed in Chapter 7, at the US-based university, two stages of the evaluation process are usually involved during the admissions process within which the perspectives of academics in the programme and people on the ‘school-wide committee’ tend to differ. More specifically, the academics are most concerned with the issue of research match but for the panel on the school-wide committee, more value is given to the test scores (GRE in particular). These different considerations may engender an issue of discourse and power that reinforces Lea and Street’s (2009) views of literacy practices that “the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power” (p. 262). One of the academics commented as follows:

Academic’s interview

Excerpt 8.1

Vicky: ... so that sounds like in the UK, um, the individual professor may have more...influence, more, er, ability to just accept who they want. It's just that we don't have that... we just don't have that capacity. We don't have that power to just say, "I want to work with this student."

In Excerpt 8.1, Vicky referred to the issue of power in the process of admissions. Despite the academics having their own individual views on which parts of the application document they value the most (‘impressionistic judgement’), they normally do not possess sheer power to determine with whom they want to work as the academics’ evaluations of the application may be influenced by the pressure that derives from the school. As it is evident in Chapter 7 that many academics have stated that they have more or less compromised their viewpoints as a result of pressure from the school-wide committee, it is also interesting to note that there seems to be a variation in terms of the extent to which the academics deal with the tension between individual and school-wide practices of evaluating the applications. In fact, some of the academics from other programmes appear to hold strong beliefs regarding the importance of the PS, and will fight against the pressure (e.g.,

favouring high GRE score) imposed from the school-wide committee. These faculty members have stated that they value the PS the most in the whole admissions application and they have considered the GRE score the last piece of information to look at since from their perspective, it is not a good predictor for determining whether the students would perform successfully in the doctoral programme. One of the academics stated the following:

Academic's interview

Excerpt 8.2

Sally: Um, we do look at the GRE score here, although for me personally I really don't value that, and some of my colleagues don't value it at all and some of them do value it, so... but we do, because, you know, it's an [prestigious] institution and we kind of have to do that... For me it's [GRE] not important because I know the history of the socioeconomic and racial discrimination of the GRE and standardised tests and so I don't look at them... but yeah, but I don't make decisions based on that. And I've had to fight for students before who had lower GREs but they graduated and they're in our faculty, you know, I mean they're fine, they're fine. They did a great job, they were amazing.

Sally's statement in Excerpt 8.2 indicates a tension between her individual practice on the evaluation of applications and those suggested in a school-wide policy. When she expressed her views on GRE score as a part of the requirements for admissions, she seems to align herself with the institution where she is based. The statement ('we do, because, you know, it's an [prestigious] institution and we kind of have to do that') appears to suggest a certain constraint that is imposed by the institution. According to the other academics, this is perhaps because of the ranking (e.g., statistics) and other kinds of things the university would have to do in order to maintain its status. Despite this being the case, Sally has her own strong view on what counts as good practice for evaluating the applications ('for me [GRE score] it's not important', 'for me personally I really don't value that'); however, she more or less acknowledges that as the member of a prestigious institution, she still needs to take on board some of the criteria for application evaluations at the school level.

Based on the discussion in this section, it can be said that the nature of the PhD study, from an academic literacies perspective, may be considered as what an ‘academic socialisation’ perspective would suggest in that it emphasises the disciplinary knowledge and the culture of the academy (Lea & Street, 1998). As my discussion has shown that the academics’ assumptions of the PS are not merely associated with the nature of the PhD study but also relate to the institution where they are based, I would argue that from students’ perspectives, it may be insufficient to get a hold on the academics’ assumptions of the PS by merely acquiring the information concerning the knowledge of the nature of PhD study. In other words, focusing on gaining disciplinary knowledge, as an ‘academic socialisation’ perspective would suggest, may not be sufficient to address the issues such as institutional practices, as an ‘academic literacies’ perspective would propose.

8.2 Perspectives of the students across two institutional contexts

This section discusses the students’ literacy practices of the PS across both universities, respectively in the UK and US. Table 8.2 below summarises the similarities and differences between the students’ expectations of the PS for the postgraduate study application across national and institutional contexts.

Table 8.2 Students' expectations of the PS across two universities

Common themes	
<i>Content and writing in the PS</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Motivation for the student's chosen field of study and the programme - Relevant experiences and background that contributes to students' proposed field of study - Showing personal characteristics 	
Different themes	
<i>Content and writing in the PS</i>	
Produce good quality of writing	<u>UK-based university</u> - Show their writing ability from their research proposal, not from their Personal Statement
	<u>US-based university</u> - Show their writing ability from their Personal Statement
Showing understanding of the faculty, field, and the programme	<u>UK-based university</u> - Show their understanding of the faculty and field from their research proposal, not from their Personal Statement
	<u>US-based university</u> - Show their understanding of the faculty and field from their Personal Statement
The amount of information to include in the PS	<u>UK-based university</u> - The extent to which students know their supervisors may influence the amount of information they want to give to the academics
	<u>US-based university</u> - Students usually try to include all relevant information in their Personal Statement
<i>The evaluation practices of the PS</i>	
The role of the PS in an application package	<u>UK-based university</u> - The Personal Statement is considered as less importance than the research proposal
	<u>US-based university</u> - The Personal Statement is one of the key documents in the application

A comparison of the themes that I have listed from the student interviews at both universities has revealed similarities and differences. Regarding the similarities, when they expressed their views of the PS, the students from both universities considered 'motivation for the study', 'relevant experiences and backgrounds' and 'showing their personal characteristics' as important factors that needed to be included in their PS. The reason for the similar understanding of what should be included in the PS amongst students may result from the guidelines that are set for postgraduate study application on the official university websites, or other printed and electronic resources that provide general advice for writing this type of text.

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In terms of the differences in the students' understanding of the PS, although students from both universities have stated that they want to present to the academics a piece of writing that is of a good quality, and to demonstrate their understanding of the faculty, field, and the programme, these elements are absent from the students' accounts at the UK institution when they talked about the PS. For instance, students at the UK-based university will often show these qualities in their research proposal rather than in their PS. This phenomenon can be linked to what I have discussed in Chapter 6, where I found that UK students value the importance of the research proposal more than the PS. In contrast, students at the focal US-based university have mostly conveyed their personal information in their PS as this is usually the only document where they can write things about themselves and also demonstrate their writing ability (Brown, 2004).

The other interesting theme I have found here is that the amount of information to include in students' PSs may be engendered by the extent to which students know their audience. This theme is prominent in the interviews with students at the UK-based university. However, this does not appear to be the case in students' interview data taken from the US-based institution. As I have mentioned in Chapter 6, most of my student participants at the UK-based institution stated that there is no need to provide much personal information ('showing one's personality', 'motivation for the proposed field of study') in their PS because they have assumed their readers would already know this information about them. In fact, these students already have personal connections to the academics in the programme where they wish to begin their doctoral study. More specifically, some student participants (5 out of 8) studied their Masters degree at the same institution where they applied for postgraduate study. As such, they may already know some of the faculty members personally having been taught by them on previous occasions. Many students might have also revealed their interests for studying a doctoral degree to a staff member while they were studying for their Masters degree and asked for assistance with their research proposal from that particular member of the staff during the application process. Some students even disclosed that they were quite sure they would be accepted onto a course even before they had completed the full application process. These instances appear to also reinforce the point that I have discussed earlier in this

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chapter: the academics possess the power to determine which students they would want to work with. In fact, the academics at the UK-based university stated that if students contact them before completing their applications, the chances of them getting accepted may be higher. This is because, according to the academics, with assistance from their potential supervisor, the quality of their proposal would normally be better and this would enhance their chances of fulfilling their academics' expectations.

In contrast, according to the interview data of student participants at the US-based university, such a close connection during the application process is relatively less frequent. This is perhaps because of the large number of applicants applying for the postgraduate programme at the US-based university and such a competitive process may make it difficult for every student to work closely with the academics during the application procedure (*see* the discussion in Chapter 7).

The discussion concerning the views of the students are not putting forward an overarching case that can be generalised and applied to other disciplines, programmes, and institutions. However, these views are those of the student participants with whom I have spoken. The aim of the discussion above is to draw attention to why some information, such as personal characteristics and motivation for the proposed field of study, are absent from some students' PSs for the postgraduate university application in the UK institution. From a traditional genre approach to these students' PSs (e.g., Bekins et al., 2004; Brown, 2004), it may be considered to be incomplete as certain information (e.g., motivation for the proposed field of study) is missing from the texts. However, from my analysis, it is evident that this is not because the students consider these elements to be unimportant; rather, it should be viewed as their assumptions about the potential readers' knowledge of the students themselves. Such a finding illustrates an important viewpoint that is in line with what the academic literacies perspective has emphasised: rather than judging student writing as good or bad, it may be more beneficial to approach "meanings as contested" as this can provide us with "insights into the nature of academic literacy in particular" (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158).

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The other difference in the students' understanding of the PS is concerned with the role of the PS as part of an entire application package. For instance, most of the students in the focal UK-based university have stated that the PS is less important than the research proposal as they know the key factor for gaining admission is the quality of the research proposal. On the contrary, most of the students at the US-based university stressed the importance of the PS as it allows them space to express their interests and motivation, and to highlight what distinguishes them from other applicants with similar qualifications.

The discussions in sections 8.1 and 8.2 have revealed similarities and differences in relation to the students' and academics' understandings and interpretations of the PS. These findings suggest that although the PS at both universities belongs to similar genres that are associated with postgraduate study applications, the meaning that lies in this type of text varies according to changing contexts. For this reason, it reinforces the view of Fairclough (2003) that it is not always useful to identify the generic structure of content in a text, but it should be recognised for its multiple sociocultural meanings. The discussion in this chapter will thus contribute something important to existing genre studies on the PS. I will further discuss this point in the following chapter.

8.3 Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the students' and academics' interpretations and understanding of the PS in the UK and US contexts. I have drawn upon an academic literacies perspective, with particular focus on issues of genre, power relations, and institutional value and epistemology. The discussion in this chapter has illustrated that at first glance the students and academics may have similar assumptions about the PS. However, these assumptions may be associated with the ideological and epistemological perspective of a particularly academic community.

The following chapter will summarise the key findings for this study. I will also discuss the theoretical and methodological implications for the study of student's academic writing. The pedagogical implications will also be addressed. I will then proceed to offer concluding remarks for this thesis.

Chapter 9 – Concluding remarks

In this concluding chapter I will **first** summarise the key findings in relation to my research questions. In the **second** section I will discuss the theoretical and methodological implications for the study of student academic writing. In the **third** section I will discuss some pedagogical implications for genre theory and pedagogy from the lens of an academic literacies perspective, aiming to bridge genre-based pedagogy and the perspectives that have been emphasised by the academic literacies approach to the teaching of student writing. In the **fourth** section, I will address the limitations of my study as well as suggest some directions for future research in this area. **Finally**, I will offer some concluding remarks for this thesis.

9.1 Summary of findings

In this section, I will summarise the key findings for the research questions that were proposed in my thesis:

9.1.1 Writer identity as represented in the Personal Statement

RQ 1 – How do students position themselves in their PSs during the writing process?

For this research question, I have drawn on the telling case of a doctoral student's (Anna) written PS for a UK-based postgraduate study application (*see* Chapters 4 and 5). The findings suggest that Anna's assumptions about the PS, the awareness of her potential readers, and the sense of herself as a writer reflect upon the various textual features included in her PS. Specifically, Anna's use of metadiscoursal resources are closely associated with her communicative intentions and can be viewed as a realisation of the writer's awareness of self and of readers in the target community.

9.1.2 Writer-reader assumptions of the Personal Statement at two institutions

RQ 2 – What are the interpretations and assumptions that have been formed by students and academics concerning the PS at the two universities?

For the students

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In response to this research question, I have found some similarities and differences concerning students' expectations of the PS across the two focal institutions. In terms of the similarities, perhaps it is not surprising that students from both universities consider it important to document their motivations for studying their chosen course, and also reveal information about their background, experiences, and some personal characteristics. These elements are prominent in the PS and are in accordance with the categories that are revealed in existing genre studies on the PS (Ding, 2007; Samraj and Monk, 2008). What is perhaps more interesting to note is that some of the views that are offered on the PS by the students at one institution do not emerge by the students at the other institution. My analysis of the inductive coding approach to the interview data does, in fact, indicate that those absent elements from one institution actually occurred when the students talked about the other dimensions of the application rather than about the PS itself. For instance, I have found students from both universities have stated that they would like to show their ability to express their ideas in a way that fits with what the academics consider academic writing. The students from the focal US-based university would like to reveal such a quality in their PS whilst students from the focal UK university stated that they would have demonstrated this quality in their research proposal rather than the PS.

Another key theme I have found from the students' interview data collected at the UK university is that despite most of the students having referred to elements such as 'motivations', 'relevant experiences', and 'personal characteristics', all of which are commonly associated with the genre of this type of text, interestingly, some of the students at the focal UK university did not refer to these elements when talking about their PS. This phenomenon, from the perspective of traditional genre move-step approach to the study of student writing, may be seen as a peculiar situation in the sense that these elements are widely regarded as crucial elements for this type of genre. Without these elements, the PS may be viewed as incomplete.

However, my analysis that draws upon the academic literacies perspectives, suggests that the absence of these elements should not be considered to be a deviant situation; rather, it should be associated with the students' assumptions of their potential

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readers' expectations and these will have influenced the information that the students have documented in their PSs. For instance, as I have discussed in Chapter 6, some students at the focal UK-based institution stated that they already knew their readers and vice versa. As such, they assumed that there may be no need to provide too much personal information to the academics. From this angle, the missing elements from the students' accounts should not be seen as some form of deficiency (Street, 2003); instead, the production of these texts should be recognised as forms of literacy practices that are relevant for the process of composing this type of text.

For the academics

As for the academics' expectations of the PS across institutional contexts, I have found some similarities and differences between the two focal universities I investigated. In terms of the content and writing of the PS, the academics have shared a similar view: motivation for a student's chosen field of study, and information about their background and experiences are of interest to the academics. According to the academics, two other important elements – research interest and student's writing ability – are also crucial.

However, unlike the former two elements ('motivation', and 'background and experiences') which were mentioned by the academics from both universities when discussing the PS, the two latter elements were referred to by the US academics in reference to the PS and the UK academics did not refer to these points when they expressed their views on the PS. However, the latter two elements were revealed when the UK academics talked about their perceptions of the research proposal. Such a finding strengthens the fact that the PS is only a part of the larger application package. Many other parts of the application packet also need to be taken into consideration.

From my analysis of the role of the PS, I have found that the PS may only be evaluated if certain other requirements have been met in the process of admissions. For instance, as I have discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, for a postgraduate university application at the focal UK institution, the PS is often considered to be a supplementary document of the research proposal and for the US postgraduate

university application, the PS may not always be read by the academics if a candidate's test scores such as GRE (Graduate Record Examinations score) do not meet the minimum requirement.

9.1.3 Writer-reader contrasting views towards the Personal Statement

RQ 3 – Are there any mismatches between the students' and academics' views of the PS at the two focal institutions?

For this research question, I have found some contrasting expectations between the students and academics at both universities. In Chapter 6, I have discussed a case study about a student's (Anna) PS for the postgraduate university application at the focal UK-based institution, drawing upon specific references to the opening paragraph written by the student. My findings suggest that the way in which the student had represented her statement did not successfully communicate her intention of showing her personality ('eager to pursue knowledge') to the academics. In a similar vein, in Chapter 7, I have drawn attention to another student's (Tommy) PS, and the student's and academics' comments that illustrate sets of contrasting views.

The similarities in both case studies are that both of the focal students intended to use a quote to help them achieve their intentions. For instance, Anna used a quote by Socrates ('the only thing I know is that I know nothing') in order to show her personality as a person who has the desire for knowledge, while Tommy adopted a quote from a film ('Dead Poets Society') to show his strong motivation for study. These attempts, according to the comments given by the academics, have proved to be unsuccessful. My discussions of these two case studies have revealed the complexities surrounding the issue of the writer's style of self-representation in texts. More specifically, the ways in which the students present their information in texts may enact different responses from the academics. In other words, what the students intend to communicate to the academics may not be always consistent with what the academics come to understand when reading these texts. These contrasting views between the students and academics reinforce what Street (2009) has proposed about

the ‘hidden features’ of academic writing that are not usually made explicit to student writers.

9.1.4 The effects of institutional practices upon the Personal Statement

RQ 4 – Are there any institutional variations across the graduate programmes, at the UK-based and US-based institutions, with regards to literacy practices that are associated with the PS at the two focal institutions?

For this research question, I found variations across the two focal institutions. More specifically, although I have assigned similar themes from the academics’ interview data at these universities, I have found the practices that are associated with these themes are varied according to cultural and institutional contexts. For instance, as I discussed in Chapter 8, the theme – ‘research interest’ – has been referred to in the academics’ interviews from both universities. For the UK admissions, the academics appear to be associated with practices in that they look for this type of information (‘research interest’) for the purpose of matching students’ research interest with specific academics who can also become their supervisors, whereas the US academics may look for this type of information with the intention of finding a research match with the people and programme in general rather than with specific academics. Also, the students who get accepted into the doctoral programme at the UK-based university are usually expected to start their individual research project as soon as they begin the course while students in the US postgraduate programme usually need to complete their coursework and research training before they develop their specific research topic and engage with their individual research project. As such, this might explain the varied practices that are associated with the theme – research interest – across institutional contexts.

In addition to the factor of different structures of the doctoral study that may influence the literacy practices of the PS, my analysis of the comparison of views between the academics at both universities has also revealed that the literacy practices of the PS may also be influenced by specific disciplines, programmes, and institutions. In terms of this aspect, what strikes me the most is the power issue that occurs during the admissions process across both universities. It is evident that the

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academics at the UK-based university usually possess more power in terms of being able to make a decision to accept or reject students based upon their individual evaluations, whilst at the focal US-based university most of the academics stated that there is a certain tension between their evaluation practices of the application document at a departmental level and the practices of people on the school-wide committee. Such a phenomenon may be associated with different practices in terms of admissions procedures. More specifically, the UK postgraduate admissions context usually relies on the document evaluation from the academics in the department, whilst the US postgraduate admissions context often involves different rounds of selection during admissions. As I discussed in Chapter 7, for the US admissions procedure, different stages of the selection process must be considered and the academics' views may be different from the views of people on the school-wide committee. Such a situation may engender certain negotiation and even tension during the admissions process.

It is also interesting to note that at both focal universities, there are no official written documents stating the criteria that academics must follow during the admissions process. In other words, the academics may have their own views and criteria when they evaluate a student's PS ('impressionistic' or 'clinical' judgements; *see* the discussions in Chapters 6 and 7). Despite the fact that the academics stressed they may have varied evaluation practices for the PS, my analysis has shown that they have more or less shared similar views in terms of the content of the PS (e.g., information about student 'motivation' to the study). This finding perhaps relates to the specific ideology and epistemology within specific disciplines and programmes, meaning that the norms and features in a particular academic community have more or less guided the academics towards similar views regarding their perceptions of the PS.

My analysis of the academics' interview data at both focal universities, with reference to the investigation of the speakers' choices in 'modality' and 'pronouns' (Fairclough, 2003), has also reflected different literacy practices that are associated with their perceptions of the PS across both universities. For instance, a textual analysis of the UK academics' interview accounts has revealed that they tended to

use the first person pronoun ('I-statements') when expressing their views of the evaluation of the PS; however, it is salient that the accounts of the US academics have shifted between the use of the first person pronoun ('I-statements') and a collaborative form of pronouns ('we-statements'), particularly when they expressed their individual evaluation practices in the department and the practices of a school-wide committee (*see* the discussions in Chapter 7).

9.2 Theoretical and methodological implications for a traditional genre-based approach to the study of the Personal Statement

As I have discussed in Chapter 1, where I reviewed relevant literature in relation to the PS, most of the studies on the PS have adopted a traditional genre-based approach to identify rhetorical moves and steps in students' writing for specific disciplines (Bekins et al., 2004; Ding, 2007; Samraj & Monk, 2008). There appears to be a lack of cross-cultural and across institutional comparison of such a text. Thus, my study looks into the literacy practice of the PS across two universities, respectively in the UK and the US. As traditional EAP approaches may not provide a sufficient insight into the social interactional and institutional features of student writing (Hyland, 2002), my study has drawn upon an academic literacies approach (Lea & Street, 1998) to investigate the PS that emphasises literacies as a social practice and aims to examine students' writing from ideological and epistemological perspectives.

My approach to an investigation of the PS has helped to address the insufficiency of traditional genre move-step analysis for this occluded genre, and hence it provides a better understanding of what is involved in this particular type of text. Although existing genre studies have revealed the categories that are considered important for the PS across various disciplines and programmes, less attention has been paid to the practices that are associated with these common categories for this type of text.

In this section, I will state some theoretical and methodological implications for the traditional genre-based approach in relation to the study of the PS and student writing in general. I have proposed five aspects of theoretical and methodological implications for the genre-based move analysis to the study of students' PSs.

The first theoretical and methodological implication for the genre approach (move-step analysis in particular) to the study of the PS is that genre analysis of the PS should be in conjunction with other forms of analysis, for instance an academic literacies approach that will allow for a better interpretation for this type of text. The genre and academic literacies approaches, from both theoretical and methodological perspectives, do not share similar ground in the sense that genre analysis aims to identify certain linguistic features and textual structure from a corpus of student writing whilst the academic literacies research foregrounds the notion of literacy as a social practice that bridges language in relation to people's actions. However, Russell et al., (2009) have stated that the academic literacies theory is "implicitly associated with a different orientation to the notion of genre" (p. 405)⁷. As the traditional genre move approach is usually adopted for an exploration of the PS, I believe that rather than merely imposing the idea of genre upon the PS, it would be more beneficial to talk about the 'instability' and 'fluidity' of this particular type of text, as these terms can better illustrate elements of writers' and readers' literacy practices that are associated with the production and interpretation of the PS. I will now discuss how the academic literacies approach might contribute to the understanding of this particular type of text and the development of genre-based approach.

As I have discussed in Chapter 1, in Barton and Brown's (2004) article regarding an interview with John Swales and Chris Feak, they noted that most of the successful PSs are usually identified with some names of famous people in the field or names of potential academics in the target academic community. In my study, I have also arrived at this finding after studying the data associated with students' PSs. However, what is perhaps more interesting is how this kind of textual feature is perceived by

⁷ "In terms of study skills, genre would be conceptualized primarily in relation to surface features and form; academic socialization would be associated with the conceptualization of genre in terms of established disciplinary norms for communication, given primarily by the texts written by academics within a disciplinary community. The empirically grounded academic literacies perspective is aligned with a view of genre as social practice rather than genre knowledge in terms of disciplinary communication per se, although this is by its very nature central to the social practice perspective" (Russell et al., 2009, p. 405).

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the academics. My analysis of the academics' interview data shows that they believe it is appropriate for students to namedrop regarding famous people or academics because this allows them to make a connection to the people, field, and target academic community. However, they also stated that it can have a negative effect if students do not approach this type of method properly. One of the academics stated as follows:

Like... um, and that only works... it's only helpful to us if, if the student really has some deep understanding of the person's research and that their research really actually fits, 'cause sometimes you'll see people that just go on the web quickly or whatever and just pull a few names and like cut and paste our areas of interest, but that's very clear to us when we're reading...and so that really doesn't help. But in the cases where they really do seem to know our research, that, that certainly can be a factor in, um, our putting them, you know, higher up on the list I think.

The account above provides insight into the issue of name-dropping in the PS. The academic's statement appears to complement the genre-based analysis in the sense that it may only arrive at this finding of the textual feature, such as name-dropping without gaining the understanding of its relevant practices. From the perspective of genre-based pedagogy, if students simply follow the instruction concerning the linguistic and textual features of the PS without being informed about how academics might actually perceive this information and how to present it properly and convincingly, there is a possibility that the name-dropping strategy may not successfully communicate the student's intention. The example that I discussed here contributes to an understanding of the PS and the perspectives of academic literacies and exposes these texts to more explicit scrutiny, and thereby also contributes to theory and practice for both the faculty and students.

My second argument is that the rhetorical moves and steps for different disciplines, which have been identified from existing genre studies on the PS, are usually treated as if they were 'common knowledge' and transparent to the applicants. My analysis of the interview data in Chapters 6 and 7, in terms of the students' and academics' expectations of the PS, has assigned some similar themes. These themes have been

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referred to in existing genre studies with respect to what should be addressed in the PS and in the instruction for admissions that are posted on official university websites. For instance, categories such as ‘describe your background’, ‘state why you wish to follow your chosen programme (‘motivation’)', and ‘state significant personal and professional experiences related to your programme of study (‘relevant experiences’)' are commonly identified in the PS. However, students may be baffled by what these categories truly mean. My analysis of students’ interview data has shown that the students are concerned about what information should be provided in relation to these categories and how it should be presented in texts.

In fact, very few studies (if any) actually reveal an in-depth exploration of the academics’ perspectives as to why they hope to see certain kinds of information in the PS. My analysis of the academics’ expectations of the PS has revealed that when they expressed their expectations of the PS, they have also talked about the practices that are associated with these expectations, which provides insight into the rationale of the prominent categories that are usually considered to be addressed in this type of text. My discussions in Chapters 6 and 7 have revealed that these categories for what should be included in the PS are associated with literacy practices that are based upon the unique ideological, epistemological, and institutional context.

In Chapter 8, I also compared and contrasted literacy practice in the PS for postgraduate study applications at the two focal institutions. The findings in this chapter have reinforced the view that literacy practice is situated within a particular cultural and institutional context (Street, 2003). For instance, although I have found similar themes (e.g., ‘research interests’, ‘gauge student’s written ability’) from both universities, it is evident that the practices associated with these themes differ and such context-specific features, in turn, account for why some themes regarding the students’ and academics’ expectations of the PS are stated by participants at one of my focal institutional contexts but are absent from the other. These findings reinforce Street’s (2003) argument that literacy should not be considered a universal concept but, rather, it should take into account other sociocultural perspectives and epistemological values within which literacy is embedded.

My third argument is that previous studies have tended to compare successful and unsuccessful PSs (Brown, 2004; Ding, 2007) and have particularly focused on the investigation of what constitutes a successful PS across disciplines. These studies, to some extent, appear to be based upon an assumption that those successful PSs are impeccable. In fact, my investigation has revealed that despite the fact that the PSs I used for the analysis are from the students who successfully got into the course of study in the focal institutions, some of the comments given by the academics on their PSs were not always positive (*see* the discussions in Chapters 6 and 7 where two case studies were discussed). From this perspective, the findings derived from the existing genre studies on successful PSs appear to give a misleading message that the rhetorical moves and other textual features identified from the texts are considered to be favourable by the academics for specific disciplines.

The existing studies also appear to fail to address the ‘instability’ and ‘fluidity’ of this type of genre in the sense that each applicant might approach it differently. For instance, my analysis of the students’ interview data at the focal UK-based university has revealed that some prominent elements in relation to the content and writing in the PS are absent from their accounts. From the academic literacies perspective, this phenomenon is, in fact, rather common amongst the students whom I spoke to at the focal UK-based university. More specifically, as I discussed in Chapter 6, the elements such as ‘personality’, ‘motivation’, and ‘relevant experiences’ are missing from the PS for the postgraduate study application in the UK-based university. This is not because these elements are insubstantial for the students, but because these were viewed unnecessary to be included in the PS because of the students’ assumptions of the academics’ knowledge of them. More specifically, some students have stated that they knew their potential academics and vice versa. For this reason, the students considered it unnecessary for them to include too much about their background and experiences as they assumed that the academics may already know this information. Such a finding seems to address the insufficiency of the genre-based approach to the study of this type of genre in the sense that genre-based analysis may not pay attention to students’ literacy practices during the process of composing their PS. From this discussion, the supplement with the academic literacies perspective that emphasises the investigation of associated writing

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practices to the study of the PS may help achieve better interpretations of the textual features derived from the genre-based approach.

My fourth argument is that the study of the PS must take into account a specific disciplinary, cultural and institutional context in order to gain insight into the role of the PS during the admissions process, and hence achieve a better interpretation of this type of text. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the existing genre studies have rarely (if at all) adopted a wider institutional approach to the PS. My study has investigated PSs from an institutional perspective that suggests many other factors at the institutional level may influence the ways in which academics approach and interpret the PS. For instance, as I discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, the PS may be devalued by the academics if other parts of the application documents have not met the minimum requirements (e.g., the quality of the research proposal, official test scores i.e. TOEFL, GRE). Some academics also stated that they do not know how to evaluate the PS without being given other parts of the application document to also review (*see* the discussions in Chapter 7). For these reasons, it can be inferred that it is crucial for research on the PS to take into account its associated evaluation practices during the admissions process in order to achieve better interpretations of this type of text.

My final methodological implication is that despite the fact that few existing genre studies on the PS have provided information about the perspectives of the academics in specific disciplines, they seem not to address the individual variation that might occur across faculties. Samraj and Monk (2008) have noted that there may be “intradepartmental variation in discursive values regarding the statement of purpose” if more than one faculty can be interviewed (p. 208). My study has, in fact, revealed that each academics may have their own criteria and views towards their evaluation of the PS.

In Chapter 6, where I discussed the UK academics’ expectations of the PS, I found that they possessed various views regarding the same student’s PS. For instance, when they responded to the information provided by one of the students concerning her extracurricular activities, some academics felt this type of information was

irrelevant while others felt it was interesting and they wanted to gain more information about it. Such a variation amongst the faculty members may be due to the fact that there is no official written criteria to govern what should be looked at in student's PS.

9.3 Pedagogical implications for Personal Statement instructors: from the lens of academic literacies

A traditional genre-based pedagogy tends to provide students with information about the specific linguistic and textual features of the PS. However, my study of students' PSs, drawing upon the academic literacies approach, has revealed the 'instability' and 'fluidity' as features of this particular genre from an institutional understanding of this type of text. In light of this point, I argue that although it is useful to provide students with information about the linguistic features and textual structure of this genre, it might be more important to enhance students' awareness of their audience, target academic community, and provide an understanding of the specific cultural and institutional context.

My study that draws upon the academic literacies approach to the study of the PS has contributed something important to the writing instruction for this document and a professional understanding of it across cultural and institutional contexts. In light of this, it might be useful to incorporate some academic literacies perspectives in the writing instruction of this genre. For instance, my study has revealed that implicit and often conflicting writing expectations exist between the student writers and the academics as readers and evaluators. These implicit dimensions can be brought to the classroom and be used for exercises that will enable students to become more aware of the writing conventions that relate to the PS for a specific discipline, programme, and institution.

My discussions in Chapters 4 – 8 on students' PSs, and students' and academics' responses to these PS texts can also be extended to the design of lessons that focus on the three main parts of the meaning-making process – text itself, writer views, and reader expectations. My use of metadiscourse analysis (Hyland, 2005) for the investigation of students' PSs can also provide an insight into some of the available

linguistic resources that students might consider as they compose their PS. Such a pedagogical implication, which attempts to draw attention to how an academic literacies perspective might complement and extend genre-based pedagogy, can be used to develop students' sense of this type of text and of academic writing at a more general level. It also acknowledges different ways of achieving written communication, and assists students as they explore their own voice and identity in writing.

9.4 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has examined the expectations and interpretations of students and academics concerning the PS across institutional contexts. However, there are some limitations in the design of this study that are the result of practical constraints and space limits for this thesis. First of all, as I collected comments made by the academics on students' PSs, I noticed that some of the comments offered by the academics at both universities were very general. This may be because some of the academics recognised the texts as belonging to current students whom they knew and therefore chose to hold back at times and did not want to say something negative about their PSs. The academics also were quite aware that I was a researcher who was collecting data for my research and that I would be using their interview data for an analysis and discussions in my thesis. These factors are likely to have influenced the ways in which such sources responded to the students' PSs.

Future research should further examine the students' chosen methods for self-representation in writing. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, each student will approach their writing differently because they possess their own individual voice and identity as a writer. While I have acknowledged that it is useful to investigate the textual features of the PS across different disciplines, programmes, and institutions, I believe that it is necessary to pay attention to how students can present information in order to effectively communicate their ideas to their readers. As I have discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 – where I have discussed a case study per chapter that illustrates contrasting views between the students and the academics – there is a difference between what the students intended to communicate in their PS and what the academics actually understood or picked up on when reading their text. Despite the

students in these case studies showing an awareness of the issues of ‘audience’ and ‘positioning’ – these being two aspects that have been addressed in Barton and Brown’s (2004) article, which stems from a conversation with John Swales and Chris Feak – my discussion on these case studies has indicated that students’ styles of self-representation in writing may (*or* may not) successfully transcend their intended meaning to the readers. For instance, in the case study of the Greek student’s (Anna) PS, she used a quote from Socrates, attempting to show her ‘personality’. Interestingly, the use of this quote triggered a number of negative responses from the academics (e.g., ‘trying to impress the readers which raised suspicions’). In this case, despite Anna’s consideration of reader expectation may be of interest to the academics, the way in which she presents her information has not helped her in communicating her ideas to the readers. From this perspective, I would argue that apart from the importance of issues of ‘audience’ and ‘positioning’, which has been emphasised by Swales and Feak (cited in Barton & Brown, 2004), what is at stake for further exploration is the issue of ‘textual style of self-representation’ in this type of text. This is because no matter how well students match the expectations of the academics in terms of what elements/information should be addressed in the text, the communication is based merely upon those written words. From this angle, it is crucial for students to write in a proper and persuasive manner that would fit in with what the academics consider to be academic writing. In other words, it is important to explore what style/voice would most effectively communicate to the academics in relation to this type of text. I believe the PS merits further exploration because of its distinctive role as a gatekeeper for students wishing to enter higher education.

9.5 Concluding points

As I have mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the purpose of this study has not been to reveal a successful model for the PS writing process, nor has it been to suggest what might be best practices for students to imitate. Rather, I have chosen to investigate the literacy practices of this type of text across institutional contexts. In contrast to previous genre studies on the PS (Barton et al., 2004; Samraj & Monk, 2008), the academic literacies perspective (Lea & Street, 2006) was adopted as my methodological and theoretical foundation that has drawn attention to both texts and

their associated writing and evaluation practices rather than merely paying attention to student writing per se. Given that the nature of the criteria for judging PSs tends to vary amongst disciplines, programmes, and institutions, and also over time, the academic literacies approach has proved extremely valuable for the exploration of this type of text as it provides a wider institutional approach to student writing.

As I stated at the beginning of this thesis, my research interest in the PS derives from my personal experiences of applying for postgraduate programmes at UK and US-based institutions as well as observing other students' processes for composing their PSs. There is an interesting point that I would like to share with you (engagement marker!) as this thesis draws to a close. I, in fact, conducted my data collection at one of the institutions where I had applied for doctoral studies but failed to secure a place. Following an exploration of the role of the PS and the academics' expectations of this particular type of text, I gained a better understanding of the possible reasons for which I did not succeed in my application to this university.

More specifically, on the one hand, when I was composing my PS, I did not carefully consider the issue of 'fit' to the programme. On the other hand, as many other institutional considerations and practices were coming into play during the admissions process, there is a possibility that the failure of my application was not related solely to the quality of it. Such retrospection reinforces the view that was stated by many of the academics at the focal university: at a certain stage in the admissions process, the student's application is no longer the focus of the evaluation. One of the academics stated as follows:

I mean I think that like the things you're bringing up, like yeah, that totally reads out like, you know, 60 people, you're like, "No you're not a good fit." "You're not serious." But then like those top ten people, it comes down to stuff that really has nothing to do with the student any more, whatsoever. It has to do with like how many other students are in the programme, who came last year? Like did we take four people who were really interested in Second Language Acquisition? Well let's try to take some people who are interested in Sociolinguistics to balance. Like that has nothing to do with you anymore! You know what I mean? Like that's completely about like the programmes ideas

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about balance or... let's, you know, try to mix. We want to make sure... or stuff like, "Well, where else is that person applying? Are they going to pick us?" because if they don't pick us, then we lose the space [as we don't have a back-up list].

The account above illustrates the complexity of admissions practices. Since it is acknowledged that the PS is a part of the application package and serves as one of the documents for evaluation during the admissions process, future research on the PS must take into account the institutional and epistemological context within which the literacy practices take place.

This study has provided a new platform that endorses the academic literacies approach for an examination of the PS. There is also a need for further study to understand the different and often implicit features of the PS across different disciplines, programmes, and institutional contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - A full detail of the small-scale exploratory study

In this section, I will report what I have found from an exploratory study of two graduate students in Education for their doctoral application to the US-based universities. The purpose of this exploratory study is twofold: firstly, as I have indicated earlier in this chapter, the genre-based approach to applicants' PSs seems to pay less attention to the issues of writer identity, write-reader perceptions of the PS and institutional ideology and epistemology than it has paid largely on the PS texts. For this reason, I work with the notion of genre and hope to see how far I can get from a genre-based move-step analysis. Secondly, I have acknowledged that some implicit concepts may not be easily noticeable in the preliminary round of data collection and analysis, and so this small-scale exploratory study would allow me to sharpen the overall research design and to identify other potential useful theoretical and analytical concepts for the main study.

In this exploratory study, two graduate students from the field of Education were recruited and their PSs and writing experiences of this type of text were examined. The questions that I investigated are as follows:

- What content has been made in these graduate students' PSs (from move-step genre analysis)?
- Did these two graduate students compose their PSs differently and, if so, how did they approach their PSs?
- What issues did students encounter during the writing processes of their PSs?
- What other issues have emerged in this exploratory study?

Data collection

In order to explore these research questions as shown above, three sources of data were collected in this exploratory study: four students' PSs written by two MA students (Ashley and Anita) who were pursuing a Ph.D. in the field of Applied Linguistics in the United States (including the first and final drafts from each student); interviews with the students; and the written feedback on the students' PSs given by a Professor who assisted them with their PSs. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the students' assumptions of what would be required in composing a PS, in-depth interviews with the students were conducted face-to-face, which lasted about 20-30 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In terms of the feedback given by the Professor who helped them with their PSs, it was collected in two different ways. In the case of Ashley, I collected her notes and journal entries as she had discussed her PS with the Professor in meetings; she provided notes she had taken in their meetings. On the other hand, Anita did not have the chance to meet the Professor to discuss her PS and so she sought help via emails. As such, I collected evidence of the email communications between them.

Data analysis

As I wished to gauge to what extent the notion of genre and genre-based analysis can help one understand students' PSs, I utilised a move-step genre analysis to analyse the schematic structures of two focal students' PSs. I drew upon Samraj and Monk's (2008) move-step frameworks to identify the key rhetorical choices and structures used by each student, and to explain why these features were chosen by them to achieve their purposes. Table 1.1 below summarises the moves and steps that Samraj and Monk (2008) have identified from the PSs:

Table 1.1 Moves and steps in Personal Statements (Samraj and Monk, 2008, p. 201)

	Ling. (12)	Elec. Eng. (9)	Bus. (14)
<i>Introduction</i>			
Generalization	2	2	4
Background	2	5	5
Goals or decision to apply	8	7	9
Total	10	7	11
<i>Background</i>			
General (Family/Travel etc.)	0	2	3
Work	10	4	11
Education	11	8	8
Research	1	8	0
Personal attributes	1	0	3
Total	12	9	14
<i>Reasons for applying</i>			
Gap in background	5	2	10
Positive gains (incl. interests)	9	7	12
Program/university attributes	8	6	8
Disciplinary and research reasons	3	7	2
Total	12	9	14
<i>Extra-curricular information</i>			
	0	5	2
<i>Conclusion</i>			
Goals and/or prediction of future	7	7	10
Self evaluation	6	3	8
Total	9	7	12

In order to reach an in-depth understanding of the students' assumptions of the PSs and their writing processes, findings that were derived from the text analysis were used as the basis of interviews with the students. Specifically, students were invited to comment on their own PSs (text-based interviews). The interview and feedback data collected served to supplement the results from the analyses of two students' first and final PS drafts; this allowed for an investigation of their writing and revision processes.

Findings and discussions

My analysis has revealed the different rhetorical considerations that can be drawn from the two students and the difficulties which they encountered during the writing and revision processes. Another interesting issue that emerged from the data is the power and authority relations between the students and their Professor during the revision process. I will discuss these findings making detailed references in the following sections.

Move-step generic structure in Ashley's and Anita's PSs

Table 1.2 below is a modified framework based on the two students' (Ashley and Anita) PSs in my exploratory study; it adapts Samraj and Monk's (2008) move-step structures in PSs. Five generic moves can be identified in my data: *Introduction*; *Credentials*; *Reasons for applying*; *Future goals*; and *Conclusion*. The focal PSs in this study consist of the same rhetorical moves but they differ in terms of the steps associated with each move. Furthermore, the sequences that identify each of the moves and steps tend to vary in these two PSs. Each move and its underlying steps are described in the following section, and the examples for each move and step are drawn from two focal students' PSs.

Table 1.2 Moves and steps in two focal Personal Statements

Moves	Definition
Move 1: Introduction	The applicant states the decision to apply or the applicant's goals in doing so.
<i>Step 1-A: Synopsis of personal background and general observation</i>	The applicant describes her research interest by giving a synopsis about the personal background or stating a general observation on current situations. * Not specifically express the decision to apply (indirect signalling)
<i>Step 1-B: Goals or decision to apply</i>	The applicant states the decision to apply * This step is more direct compared with Step 1-A.
Move 2: Credentials	The applicant establishes credentials related to the fields of education or use her backgrounds to justify why she finds the programme desirable.
<i>Step 2-A: Research experiences</i>	The applicant reviews relevant research experiences.
<i>Step 2-B: Academic achievements</i>	The applicant reveals academic achievements related to the proposed field of study.
<i>Step 2-C: Professional experiences</i>	The applicant discusses professional experiences (e.g., internship, teaching experiences).
Move 3: Reasons for applying	The applicant explains reasons for pursuing the proposed study.
<i>Step 3-A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation</i>	The applicant gives reason for academic interests in applied linguistics based on her observations or experiences.
<i>Step 3-B: Disciplinary and research reasons</i>	The applicant states how the target programme meets her interests and gives reasons for pursuing future education in order to continue the training and interdisciplinary research in the target programme.
<i>Step 3-C: Programme/university attributes</i>	The applicant describes what is appealing about the programme in terms of the faculty research interests, course offerings, and specialisations offered.

Move 4: Future (career) goals after completion of the programme	The applicant states future study/career goals.
<i>Step 4-A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation / contribution</i>	The applicant states future study/career goals by describing personal observations, experiences and potential contribution.
Move 5: Conclusion	The applicant refers to the school's reputation or emphasises again the uniqueness which makes her qualified candidates.
<i>Step 5-A: Goals and/or prediction of future</i>	The applicant restates the short and long term goals, which might be included a hopeful prediction for success.
<i>Step 5-B: Self-promotion</i>	The applicant makes one last attempt to sell herself by summing up all the attributes to convince the reader why the programme should admit the applicant.
<i>Step 5-C: Understanding of the proposed study/programme</i>	The applicant describes her understanding of the proposed study, such as courses offered by the programme.

Note: The listed move-steps in Table 1.2 are not in a sequential order except for the moves of introduction and conclusion. The move-step structures vary with different applicants.

Move 1: Introduction

This move is the opening section of PSs. Its purpose is to attract potential readers' attention. The introduction is usually the most crucial part of PSs which can determine the first impression of potential audiences (Ishop, 2008; Barton et al. 2004). It is therefore a big challenge for applicants to write this move properly and at the same time, make it appealing. There are two rhetorical strategies to fulfil the purpose of Move 1.

Step 1-A: Synopsis of personal background and general observations

In this step, the applicant describes her research interest by giving summarising her personal background or by stating a general observation on current situations pertaining to her research direction. See Excerpt 1.1 below:

Excerpt 1.1

I have always been fascinated by the diversity of language and culture. This curiosity drew me to study languages as a young university student, and to double major in English and Japanese. Not only did I learn to speak these two languages, but I also learned a great deal about cultural patterns enacted through language, and I was fascinated by the differences I found. This interest became even more apparent to me when I took a course on the ways in which English is used worldwide. My studies in this area revealed to me not only the vast linguistic similarities and differences in English across cultures and communities, but also how language served as a context for the understanding and appreciation of cultural distinctions. (*From Ashley*)

In Excerpt 1.1, the applicant explains that she doubled major two languages during her bachelor study and mentions her interests in language and culture. To some extent, it performs the function of a personal narration.

Step 1-B: Goals or decision to apply

The applicant explicitly states the goals or decision to apply for the proposed field of study. See Excerpt 1.2 below:

Excerpt 1.2

I am applying to the PhD program in applied linguistics in order to broaden my perspective of language acquisition in L2 learners. More specifically, I am interested in English writing for specific purposes. English has emerged as a lingua franca, used as a communications medium in an increasingly global world, both in social and professional contexts. As a result, the need to write effectively and concisely in English has become urgent and necessary.
(From Anita)

Excerpt 1.2 actually contains steps 1-A and 1-B. The first sentence of Excerpt 1.2 clearly states the programme (Applied Linguistics) which the applicant wants to pursue. Further, she expresses a general observation and remarks on the issue of English as a lingua franca, and further highlighting the needs of English writing for specific purposes.

Move 2: Credentials

In this move, the applicants establish credentials related to the fields of education or use their research, academic, and professional backgrounds to justify why they find the programme desirable, wanting to persuade the potential readers that they are qualified for the proposed study.

Step 2-A: Research experiences

In this step, the applicant reviews and discusses her research experiences pertaining to her chosen programme. The applicant states what she believes to be attributes that make her attractive to the programme. See Excerpt 1.3 below:

Excerpt 1.3

As a senior, I discovered my passion for the analysis of language and communication while conducting research on medical discourse for my thesis writing course. Although this was my first research project, I quickly realized that the research process included diverse and complex activities. Nevertheless, through intensive and demanding guidance from my advisor, I overcame these challenging tasks. In addition to developing my knowledge of the research process, I learned how to work both independently and cooperatively. My first publicly recognized success in this endeavour occurred upon the acceptance of my paper on the analysis of doctor-patient communication in medical discourse for presentation at AAAL in California (2007). (From Ashley)

In Excerpt 1.3, the applicant states and discusses her first experience of conducting research in her undergraduate study. She also gives an example of recognised success in her work.

Step 2-B: Academic achievements

This step describes the applicant's academic achievements related to the proposed field of study. Commonly, applicants discuss highlights of their education. See Excerpt 1.4 below:

Excerpt 1.4

Through my study of TESOL, I have observed how language serves as a medium for mutual understanding and as a means for the appreciation of cultural differences. I realized that research in language and education is multidisciplinary: it blends elements of socio- and psycho- linguistics, a consideration for cultural phenomena, and also a practical teaching pedagogy. Language teachers with knowledge of different teaching approaches and a strong linguistic background are more likely to design lessons that are well-suited to students' needs. (*From Anita*)

Excerpt 1.4 expresses the applicant's academic experiences in the TESOL programme. She describes the importance of the multidisciplinary aspects she realised through her MA study.

Step 2-C: Professional experiences (e.g., internship; teaching experiences)

In this step, the applicant expresses her professional experiences. In my small PS corpus, the two PSs are for Applied Linguistics programme. It is commonly that the applicants state their previous or current teaching experiences. See Excerpt 1.5 below:

Excerpt 1.5

I have even had the opportunity to put my training into practice as a teacher. For my internship, I taught English in a non-profit organization. Through my experiences as a student, researcher, and teacher, I have come to understand that there is always a gap between theory and practice and that I can no longer assume a "one-size-fits-all" approach. (*From Ashley*)

In Excerpt 1.5, the applicant mentions her internship experiences during her MA study. In Applied Linguistics, it is always viewed as attributes to have language teaching experiences.

Move 3: Reasons for applying

This is the key move in which applicants explain the reasons to pursue the proposed study and more broadly, reasons for the commitment to the field of study.

Step 3-A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation

The applicant gives reason for academic interests in Applied Linguistics based on her observations, experiences, or evaluation. See Excerpt 1.6 below:

Excerpt 1.6

As a L2 learner and ESL teacher, I observed many challenges that students encountered when they were writing essays for specific subjects. I realized that to become successful writers in a given discipline, learners not only need to acculturate to the discipline, but also have to learn the most effective and appropriate language structures per that correspond to institutional convention. Particularly in professional contexts, there is a high expectation for well-written English. In order to help students successfully participate in a target community, I desire to specialize in language research, focusing on providing learners with language education to meet the requirements. (*From Anita*)

Excerpt 1.6 states the applicant's reasons for applying to the programme based on her previous observations and evaluations of students' writing practice. She stresses the high demand for well-written English texts so that she wants to pursue further study so as to help students with their academic writings.

Step 3-B: Disciplinary and research reasons

The applicant states how the target programme meets her interests and gives reasons for pursuing future education in order to continue the training and interdisciplinary research in the target programme. See Excerpt 1.7 below:

Excerpt 1.7

I have come to realize the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and research. To develop this understanding, I have taken numerous courses in linguistics, languages, psychology, and education in my undergraduate and graduate courses of study. Now, I am looking for the opportunity to continue my training and interdisciplinary research. For this reason, I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Linguistics at the *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym), where I will be able to engage in research in an excellent academic environment where interdisciplinary research is apparent among the faculty. (*From Ashley*)

In Excerpt 1.7, the applicant states the importance of interdisciplinary research in the proposed field of study. She wants to pursue the further study to develop this understanding.

Sep 3-C: Programme/university attributes

The applicant describes the faculty research interests, course offerings, and specialisations offered in a particular programme. Here, the applicant does not just mention why she wants to pursue a doctoral degree in a particular discipline but also why she wants to pursue this particular programme. See Excerpt 1.8 below:

Excerpt 1.8

Now, I am looking for the opportunity to continue my training and interdisciplinary research. For this reason, I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Linguistics at the *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym), where I will be able to engage in research in an excellent academic environment where interdisciplinary research is apparent among the faculty. (*From Ashley*)

Excerpt 1.8 shows the reason why the applicant wants to pursue this particular programme by stating positive marks on the institution's reputation.

Move 4: Future (career) goals after completion of the programme

This move presents the applicants' future academic or career goals after successfully completing the programme. It is commonly along with their strong motivations embedded in this move.

Step 4-A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation / contribution

The applicant states future study or career goals by describing personal observations, experiences, and potential contribution to the field of study. See Excerpt 1.9 below:

Excerpt 1.9

My goal for studying applied linguistics is to help L2 learners to reduce their learning difficulty with regard to language and cultural acquisition. Given my strong interest in L2 writing, I desire to explore prescriptive guidelines for teaching writing in professional contexts, and to help students to meet those expectations while retaining their unique individual voices. (*From Anita*)

In Excerpt 1.9, the applicant states that the future career goal is to reduce students' difficulty of language and culture learning and to assist them with their academic writing.

Move 5: Conclusion

This is the concluding move to end the PSs. Commonly, the applicants refer to the school's reputation, restate the future study goals or emphasise again the uniqueness which makes them qualified candidates. Three steps are found in this move. However, these steps are not completely independent themselves. It may embed or overlap each other. Further explanations are as follows.

Step 5-A: Goals and/or prediction of future

The applicant restates the short and long term goals, which might be included a hopeful prediction for success. See Excerpt 1.10 below:

Excerpt 1.10

Being granted the opportunity to learn in this superb academic institution will allow me to develop a variety of skills that will better prepare me to achieve my goal of being a researcher, language educator, and policy maker par excellence, // and although this program will undoubtedly present me with many challenges, my achievements and dedication demonstrate that I am prepared for this graduate program. (*From Ashley*)

It should be noted that this excerpt comprises two steps in one sentence: *goals or prediction of future*, and *self-promotion*. The first bit of this sentence presents the applicant's potential achievement in the future. The second bit shows the applicant's strong confidence in her capability of studying a Ph.D. for her chosen field of study.

Step 5-B: Self-promotion

The applicant makes one last attempt to sell herself by summing up all the attributes to convince the reader why the programme should admit the applicant. See Excerpt 1.11 below:

Excerpt 1.11

As a researcher with a broad background in theoretical linguistics, TESOL pedagogy, and practical teaching experience, I would be a productive Ph.D. candidate and make my own contribution to your program. (*From Anita*)

Excerpt 1.11 restates the applicant's suitability for the proposed field of study. She states her past academic and professional experiences to reinforce her capacity for studying in the target programme.

Step 5-C: Understanding of the proposed study/programme

The applicant describes her understanding of the proposed study, such as courses offered by the programme. See Excerpt 1.12 below:

Excerpt 1.12

With its combined training in theoretical and practical backgrounds, the Educational Linguistics Ph.D. program at the *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym) will help me develop my interests in research, teaching and applied linguistics. This program, with its renowned faculty and reputation in education and linguistics, is undoubtedly the best place for me to pursue further training. In this program, I will receive instruction from experts in cultural studies, language and acquisition, analysis of speech acts and discourse, language socialisation and development, and policy analysis and evaluation. (*From Ashley*)

In Excerpt 1.12, the applicant mentions some training subjects such as language acquisition, cultural studies and so forth to demonstrate her understanding of the target programme.

In this preliminary text analysis on PSs, the five moves identified above all occur in my data. Although these two PSs comprise the same rhetorical moves, they vary with embedded steps (strategies) utilised to achieve rhetorical purposes for each move. The results obtained from text content and move-step analysis will be discussed in the following section, addressing to my research questions.

Comparison: Move-step structure between Ashley's and Anita's PSs (final draft)

Table 1.3 below illustrates the different structural sequences of Ashley's and Anita's PSs. Although five moves occur in both PSs, the steps embedded in each move are different.

Table 1.3 Structural sequences of Personal Statements (final draft)

Ashley's PS	Anita's PS
<i>Move 1 Introduction</i>	<i>Move 1 Introduction</i>
Step 1A: Give a synopsis about the background	Step 1B: Goals or decision to apply
↓	Step 1A: Give a synopsis about the background?
<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>	↓
Step 3A: Personal observations/experiences/evaluation	<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>
↓	Step 3A: Personal observations/experiences/evaluation (e.g. the increasing need of experts in ESP)
<i>Move 4 Future (career) goals</i>	↓
Step 4A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation / contribution	<i>Move 4 Future (career) goals</i>
↓	Step 4A: Personal observations / experiences / evaluation / contribution
<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>	↓
Step 3B: Disciplinary and research reasons	<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>
↓	Step 3B: Disciplinary and research reasons
<i>Move 2 Credentials</i>	↓
Step 2A: Research experiences	<i>Move 2 Credentials</i>
Step 2B: Academic achievements	Step 2A: Research experiences
Step 2C: Professional experiences (e.g., internship)	Step 2B: Academic achievements
↓	Step 2C: Professional experiences (e.g., teaching experiences)
<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>	↓
Step 3A: Personal observations/experiences/evaluation	<i>Move 5 Conclusion</i>
Step 3B: Disciplinary and research reasons	Step 5C: Understanding of the proposed study
Step 3C: Programme/university attributes	Step 5A: Goals and/or prediction of future
↓	Step 5B: Self-promotion
<i>Move 2 Credentials</i>	
Step 2B: Academic achievements	
↓	
<i>Move 3 Reasons for applying</i>	
Step 3B: Disciplinary and research reasons	
Step 3C: Programme/university attributes	
↓	
<i>Move 5 Conclusion</i>	
Step 5A: Goals and/or prediction of future	
Step 5C: Understanding of the proposed study	
Step 5B: Self-promotion	

As shown in Table 1.3, the sequential order of Ashley's PS is *Introduction – Reasons for applying – Future goals – Reasons for applying – Credentials – Reasons for applying – Conclusion* (Moves 1 – 3 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 3 – 2 – 3 – 5). On the other hand, Anita presents the pattern of *Introduction – Reasons for applying – Future Goals – Reasons for applying – Credentials – Conclusion* (Moves 1 – 3 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 5). These move structures indicate that each move may neither appear in any fixed order, nor merely occur once in any predictable sequence. They are referred to as different strategies and writing styles of the applicants.

To further explore the differences between these two PSs, the number of words was calculated in each PS for each move and the strategies under each move were also scrutinised. The texts analysed are two applicant's final draft of their PSs.

Table 1.4 Comparisons between Ashley's and Anita's final draft of PS

Draft Moves	Ashley' PS		Anita's PS	
	Total words of each move	Percentage*	Total words of each move	Percentage*
Move 1 Introduction	124	13.00%	73	9.40%
Move 2 Credentials	354	37.20%	407	52.70%
Move 3 Reasons for applying	311	32.70%	126	16.30%
Move 4 Future (career) goals	15	1.60%	56	7.20%
Move 5 Conclusion	148	15.50%	111	14.40%
Total	952	100%	773	100%

*This is the percentage of the words of each move-step when compared with the total number of words in the text.

As can be seen from Table 1.4, both applicants put strong emphasis on *Credentials* move, particularly in the Anita's PS (52.70%) which goes over half of the percentage of the whole text. Apart from the *Credentials* move, the percentage of *Reasons for applying* move (Ashley's PS: 32.70%; Anita's PS: 16.30%) in both PSs is the second highest amongst the five moves. This reveals that the informants in my study make lots of efforts to demonstrate their attributes and to discuss the reasons why they choose a particular field of study. However, the ways they display the moves of *Credentials* and *Reasons for applying* are different.

In terms of *Credentials* move, Ashley summarises her past research and professional experiences, and academic accomplishments. She seems to list attributes she possesses such as the courses she had taken, the research papers she had presented in various conferences, and other qualifications. See Excerpt 1.13 as follows:

Excerpt 1.13

My first publicly recognized success in this endeavour occurred upon the acceptance of my paper on the analysis of doctor-patient communication in medical discourse for presentation at AAAL in California (2007). My research analyzing the effect of patients' ages on a Taiwanese doctor's

questions in primary care encounters will be presented at AAAL (2008) in Washington, D.C. In addition to the research project, I took two graduate courses in my undergraduate career: Language Acquisition Theories and Research in Applied Linguistics, both of which enabled me to expand my ability to analyse language in different contexts. Additionally, my study at the *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym) has provided me with diverse theoretical perspectives on teaching and learning. I have also taken several theoretical courses regarding teaching English as a second/foreign language, such as Approaches to Teaching English and Other Modern Languages, Educational Linguistics, and Classroom Discourse and Interaction. These courses have helped me gain knowledge of teaching principles and methodologies. (*From Ashley*)

In contrast, Anita integrates the graduate courses into several broader aspects rather than mentions the specific course titles as shown in Ashley's PS. For instance, she states her observation on language and culture in general through her MA study. See Excerpt 1.14 below:

Excerpt 1.14

Through my study of TESOL, I have observed how language serves as a medium for mutual understanding and as a means for the appreciation of cultural differences. I realized that research in language and education is multidisciplinary: it blends elements of socio- and psycho- linguistics, a consideration for cultural phenomena, and also a practical teaching pedagogy. Language teachers with knowledge of different teaching approaches and a strong linguistic background are more likely to design lessons that are well-suited to students' needs. I also learned, through consideration of the cultural aspects of language, how linguistics is used to bridge connections between society and language, and how people's use of language differs across social and regional variations. This study has enabled me to look into the underlying cultural dynamics of language use and has provided me with diverse perspectives on teaching and research strategies. (*From Anita*)

The most striking results from the data are the discrepancies of the *Introduction* and *Conclusion* move in the two PSs. The *Introduction* move in Ashley's PS presents a synopsis of personal background and general observation (Step 1-A); however, Anita's PS shows the specific goals and decision to apply to the programme (Step 1-B). See Excerpts 1.15 and 1.16 below. These two excerpts indicate the distinct strategies which two applicants used in their PSs.

Excerpt 1.15

I have always been fascinated by the diversity of language and culture. This curiosity drew me to study languages as a young university student, and to double major in English and Japanese. Not only did I learn to speak these two languages, but I also learned a great deal about cultural patterns enacted through language, and I was fascinated by the differences I found. This interest became even more apparent to me when I took a course on the ways in which English is used worldwide. My studies in this area revealed to me not only the vast linguistic similarities and differences in English across cultures and communities, but also how language served as a context for the understanding and appreciation of cultural distinctions. (*From Ashley*)

Excerpt 1.16

I am applying to the Ph.D. program in applied linguistics in order to broaden my perspective of language acquisition in L2 learners. More specifically, I am interested in English writing for specific purposes. English has emerged as a lingua franca, used as a communications medium in an increasingly global world, both in social and professional contexts. As a result, the need to write effectively and concisely in English has become urgent and necessary.
(From Anita)

In terms of the *Conclusion* move, Ashley indicates the goal of the future study (Step 5-A) and the understanding of the target programme (Step 5-C), and restates the preparation and commitment to the proposed study (Step 5-B). See Excerpt 1.17 below:

Excerpt 1.17

With its combined training in theoretical and practical backgrounds, the Educational Linguistics Ph.D. program at the *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym) will help me develop my interests in research, teaching and applied linguistics. This program, with its renowned faculty and reputation in education and linguistics, is undoubtedly the best place for me to pursue further training. In this program, I will receive instruction from experts in cultural studies, language and acquisition, analysis of speech acts and discourse, language socialisation and development, and policy analysis and evaluation. Being granted the opportunity to learn in this superb academic institution will allow me to develop a variety of skills that will better prepare me to achieve my goal of being a researcher, language educator, and policy maker par excellence, and although this program will undoubtedly present me with many challenges, my achievements and dedication demonstrate that I am prepared for this graduate program. (From Ashley)

Unlike Ashley, Anita specifies a faculty member's name whom she is interested in working with. See Excerpt 1.18 below:

Excerpt 1.18

The Ph.D. program at *University of New Wilson* (pseudonym) is particularly attractive to me because of its dedication to examining a variety of linguistic phenomena through various models of analysis. With your excellent faculty as well as its reputation for education, I would gain a solid foundation in linguistics and research methodology. I am intrigued by Dr. ***'s research on teachers' intentions and learners' perceptions about oral corrective feedback. Particularly, I am interested in exploring parallels to this research from a writing perspective. As a researcher with a broad background in theoretical linguistics, TESOL pedagogy, and practical teaching experience, I would be a productive Ph.D. candidate and make my own contribution to your program. (From Anita)

Anita's strategy of referring to only one faculty in the targeted academic programme shows her preference for working with a specific faculty as well as demonstrating her understanding of the proposed programme.

Comparisons between Ashley's first and final drafts of her PS

In order to investigate the applicants' writing and revision processes, which are associated with the PS, the first and final drafts of two applicants' PSs were examined. Apart from the text analysis, the face-to-face interviews with two applicants were conducted to supplement the results of move-step analyses. Table 1.5 below illustrates the comparisons between Ashley's first and final draft of her PS.

Table 1.5 Comparisons between Ashley's first and final drafts of her PS

Draft Moves	First draft		Final draft	
	Total words of each move	Percentage*	Total words of each move	Percentage*
Move 1 Introduction	71	6.20%	124	13.00%
Move 2 Credentials	519	45.30%	354	37.20%
Move 3 Reasons for applying	292	25.50%	311	32.70%
Move 4 Future (career) goals	69	6.00%	15	1.60%
Move 5 Conclusion	194	17.00%	148	15.50%
Total	1145	100%	952	100%

*This is the percentage of the words of each move-step when compared with the total number of words in the text.

From Table 1.5 above we can see that the *Credentials* move decreases in the final draft (from 45.30% to 37.20%) but *Reasons for applying* move increases (from 25.50% to 32.70%). Moreover, the portions of *Introduction* and *Conclusion* moves become similar in the final text compared with the first draft. In general, the overall content of the text does not change dramatically except for the first three paragraphs. See Excerpts 1.19 and 1.20 below:

Excerpt 1.19 (From Ashley's first draft)

Hard work does not necessarily ensure success; however, success undoubtedly requires hard work. As long as I persevere in the face of challenges, I will achieve, with one mind, one heart, and two hands.

I first realized that I was determined to be a linguist or language instructor when I found myself enjoying social activities not only for companionship and fun, but also for the chance to analyze language and communication. My ultimate goal therefore is to become a linguist, researcher and language specialist who assists people in college or in various careers specializations with learning English vernacular that is appropriate for their specific profession—this type of English is known as English for specific purposes (ESP) or languages for specific purposes (LSP). I understand that in order to complete this goal, I must study diverse aspects of linguistics expertise. My first step in this endeavour was my paper on the analysis of doctor-patient conversational communication in medical discourse (English for medical purposes), which was presented at AAAL in California (2007) and my research on an analysis of the effect of patients' ages on Taiwanese doctor's questions in primary care encounters will be presented at AAAL (2008) in Washington, D.C.

I have always been fascinated by language and cultural diversity, and their relationship since I was a senior in the Department of Foreign Languages and Applied Linguistics at *** University in Taiwan. I am a native speaker of both Mandarin and Taiwanese and I double majored in both English and

Japanese in my undergraduate career. My previous overseas studying experiences, college education and graduate study in the United States aroused my further interests in applied linguistics and language teaching, and offered me opportunities to broaden my knowledge and realize how various cultures influence language behaviors.

Excerpt 1.20 (From Ashley's final draft)

I have always been fascinated by the diversity of language and culture. This curiosity drew me to study languages as a young university student, and to double major in English and Japanese. Not only did I learn to speak these two languages, but I also learned a great deal about cultural patterns enacted through language, and I was fascinated by the differences I found. This interest became even more apparent to me when I took a course on the ways in which English is used worldwide. My studies in this area revealed to me not only the vast linguistic similarities and differences in English across cultures and communities, but also how language served as a context for the understanding and appreciation of cultural distinctions.

I first realized that I was determined to pursue a career in linguistics and language instruction when I found myself observing language and communication during social interactions. My desire is to specialize in language research and instruction, focusing on language in use. I am interested in discourse analysis of language in interaction where particular ways of speaking are used in specific professions. I understand that in order to complete this goal, I must study diverse aspects of linguistics, with an emphasis on semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics.

The distinctive differences that appear between the first three paragraphs of Ashley's first draft of the PS and her final one are, according to her, a consequence of the feedback that she received from her advisor. Specifically, Ashley had sent her PS to one of her advisors during her MA studies, asking for some advice. She then modified her PS based on the feedback given by her advisor. As the feedback from her advisor mainly focused upon the first several paragraphs of Ashley's statement, she modified these particular paragraphs. However, Ashley reported that although she felt some other parts of the text still needed to be improved, she did not ask for further advice as she feared of challenging her advisor's feedback. Ashley stated that she had a strong belief in her advisor's expertise so she took almost all her advisor's comments into consideration with producing her PS.

Comparisons between Anita's first and final drafts of her PS

This section aims to compare the first and final drafts of Anita's PS in order to investigate her writing and revision processes. Table 3.6 below presents changes in the numbers of words between the first and final drafts she produced. Some possible explanations for these changes will also be explored and will be supported by the interview and feedback data collected from Anita.

Table 1.6 Comparisons between Anita's first and final drafts of her PS

Draft Moves	First draft		Final draft	
	Total words of each move	Percentage*	Total words of each move	Percentage*
Move 1 Introduction	73	9.70%	73	9.40%
Move 2 Credentials	354	46.80%	407	52.70%
Move 3 Reasons for applying	157	20.80%	126	16.30%
Move 4 Future (career) goals	57	7.50%	56	7.20%
Move 5 Conclusion	115	15.20%	111	14.40%
Total	756	100%	773	100%

*This is the percentage of the words of each move-step when compared with the total number of words in the text.

As can be seen from Table 1.6 above, the percentages of the *Introduction*, *Future goals*, and *Conclusion* move are similar in Anita's first and final draft. Nevertheless, *Credentials* move increased (from 46.80% to 52.70%) but *Reasons for applying* move decreased (from 20.80% to 16.30%) in the final draft. Compared with Ashley's first and final draft of the PS, Anita's PS is changed relatively less. According to Anita, the reason why she did not modify much from the first to the final draft is because the time was so tight for her to do the revision. She spent much time waiting for her advisor's feedback. During this period, she kept revising by herself. As she produced the second new draft, she sent to her advisor again and asked her to give feedback based on the second draft. She also stated that her advisor did not give her specific instruction so that she did not know how to edit it. See the advisor's comment on Anita's PS below:

Excerpt 1.21 Advisor's comments on the PS

You are on the right track - but after you write that you want to study L2 writing, you lose that theme and don't mention it until the end. You focus instead on what you already accomplished. That's fine, but make sure to show how it is relevant to your proposed research on writing.

The message referred to above is taken from Anita's email communication with her advisor. In this email, Anita's advisor mentioned that she had lost the theme but did not specify where this occurred in Anita's PS. Anita revealed that she did not make many modifications as she felt her advisor did not provide sufficient guidance concerning which parts in her PS needed to be modified. Anita's accounts justify why the portion of each move is similar at each new stage; an exception occurs in the minor change of her *Credentials* and *Reasons for applying*, which can be identified when reading the first and final drafts.

The issues that students encountered in their PS writing and revision processes

This section reports on some of the themes derived from the interviews with the two focal students. My analysis has found that the students encountered various issues during their writing and revising processes. Table 1.7 below summarises the similarities and differences between their experiences and writing practices.

Table 1.7 Issues emerged in PS writing and revision processes

Issues	Students	Ashley (Face-to-face communication)	Anita (Email-communication)
Similarities			
Power and authority imbalance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- preferred not to challenge the feedback provided by the advisor- feared that they might not prepare well to sound like insiders of their proposed field		
Feedback retrieval within time constraint	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- could not get very specific instruction		
Affective factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- experienced anxiety and nervousness when communicating with the advisor		
Differences			
Power and authority imbalance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- felt struggling between keeping or modifying her PS according to the advisor's feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- spent much time waiting for the advisor's feedback but feared of too much push on the advisor- hesitated to ask more specific instruction based on little feedback from the advisor	
Time issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- could not take every note during the limited meeting time- was hard to answer some professional questions proposed by the advisor within the time constraint	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- spent much time writing requests and responding to the advisor's emails- was hard to go over all the concerns regarding PS writing	
Interaction and negotiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- feared to challenge the advisor's feedback on the spot- did not have enough time to respond some impromptu questions raised by the advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- had some communication breakdowns occurred through email negotiation- could not make some points clearly and specifically in emails- could not clarify applicant's concern immediately and effectively- spent much time thinking how to respond to the advisor's feedback	

Table 1.7 highlights several issues/challenges that emerged when the students composed their PSs. Although both applicants faced different issues in two communication channels (via face-to-face and email), the most striking issue to emerge from their interview data is to do with the relationships of power and authority between the expert and the applicant. This power and authority imbalance created some sense of tension as the applicants sought professional help from their advisor. Such tension can become more apparent to the applicant when the expert is actually the one who will also write their reference letter. For instance, Ashley intended to apply at the graduate school where her advisor was also based. Ashley reported that she feared challenging what her advisor had suggested she change on her PS. Specifically, as the professor stated that her research direction might not meet any faculty member's research interests for her proposed programme, Ashley said that she was

aware of the conflicts as well as the dilemma of not changing her research interest or modifying its direction to meet her advisor's expectations; she knew her advisor would be one of the faculty members reviewing her application documents for admission. Ashley said she felt so frustrated after the meeting with her advisor.

Another issue that has emerged in the cases of both students is to do with time constraint. The meeting time to discuss PS revisions with an expert is often limited. Due to time pressure, Ashley usually could not clearly respond to those professional questions proposed by her advisor at their meeting. For example, she expressed her research interest in English for Specific Purposes. Her advisor wanted her to explain this point in more detail. However, she had a hard time describing this to her advisor since ESP is a highly specialised field of study. Although she knew what the ESP is, she did not know how to describe it in concise terms and specifically within a limited time. Furthermore, Ashley expressed her nervousness and anxiety when communicating and negotiating ideas with her advisor. She was afraid about being under-prepared for their meeting and that she might be considered an outsider by her advisor. She wanted to sound as a "professional" and "qualified" doctoral candidate. Due to the time pressure, it was also hard for her to consider every aspect of the advisor's feedback for her PS. Furthermore, according to Ashley, more questions regarding the PS writing came to her whilst in discussion with her advisor. However, due to time pressure, she did not have time to consult her advisor about other concerns regarding her PS and this discouraged her by leaving those questions in mind.

Unlike Ashley, Anita did not have the chance to meet with her advisor in person because the advisor stated that she was too busy to meet with her. Therefore, Anita emailed the PS to her advisor and also posed some questions or concerns. As with Ashley, due to the unequal power and authority in this professional relationship, between the novice student and an experienced expert, the applicant struggled with the power imbalance while seeking professional help via email communication. Firstly, Anita was afraid of pushing the advisor too much although she spent much time waiting for feedback from her. She reported that she spent lots of time figuring out how best to ask for help and how to respond appropriately to the advice offered by her advisor. In order to write properly and leave a good impression on her advisor, she relied on the technique of hedging and tended to maintain a lower position via her politeness in the emails she wrote. She feared challenging her advisor's comments on her PS even though she disagreed with some of the feedback given. Since the advisor was the one who would write her a reference letter, she simply accepted most of her advisor's comments. The power imbalance is rather apparent in their email communications. Anita expressed her anxiety in responding to the follow-up emails. She was so afraid that she might respond inappropriately and unprofessionally which might lead her to be considered an unqualified candidate in the reference letter.

Compared to the face-to-face interaction, Anita got fewer opportunities to negotiate and communicate with her advisor during the revision process. Due to the length limit of each email, it was very hard for the applicant to discuss all her concerns about her PS. Furthermore, whilst not wanting to appear to be rude, Anita was always hesitant to ask further questions or to update her ideas until she got the professor's response. Unfortunately, she often got very little feedback. This discouraged her to ask for more specific feedback the next time.

Appendix 2 – Ashley and Anita’s Personal Statements

The Personal Statement by Ashley

(Notes: The mark of ‘***’ in this text is the information protected by the researcher.)

I have always been fascinated by the diversity of language and culture. This curiosity drew me to study languages as a young university student, and to double major in English and Japanese. Not only did I learn to speak these two languages, but I also learned a great deal about cultural patterns enacted through language, and I was fascinated by the differences I found. This interest became even more apparent to me when I took a course on the ways in which English is used worldwide. My studies in this area revealed to me not only the vast linguistic similarities and differences in English across cultures and communities, but also how language served as a context for the understanding and appreciation of cultural distinctions.

I first realized that I was determined to pursue a career in linguistics and language instruction when I found myself observing language and communication during social interactions. My desire is to specialize in language research and instruction, focusing on language in use. I am interested in discourse analysis of language in interaction where particular ways of speaking are used in specific professions. I understand that in order to complete this goal, I must study diverse aspects of linguistics, with an emphasis on semantics, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics.

As a senior, I discovered my passion for the analysis of language and communication while conducting research on medical discourse for my thesis writing course. Although this was my first research project, I quickly realized that the research process included diverse and complex activities. Nevertheless, through intensive and demanding guidance from my advisor, I overcame these challenging tasks. In addition to developing my knowledge of the research process, I learned how to work both independently and cooperatively. My first publicly recognized success in this endeavor occurred upon the acceptance of my paper on the analysis of doctor-patient communication in medical discourse for presentation at AAAL in California (2007). My research analyzing the effect of patients’ ages on a Taiwanese doctor’s questions in primary care encounters will be presented at AAAL (2008) in Washington, D.C.

In addition to the research project, I took two graduate courses in my undergraduate career: *Language Acquisition Theories and Research in Applied Linguistics*, both of which enabled me to expand my ability to analyze language in different contexts. Additionally, my study at the *** has provided me with diverse theoretical perspectives on teaching and learning. I have also taken several theoretical courses regarding teaching English as a second/foreign language, such as *Approaches to Teaching English and Other Modern Languages*, *Educational Linguistics*, and *Classroom Discourse and Interaction*. These courses have helped me gain knowledge of teaching principles and methodologies. Furthermore, other courses such as *Sociolinguistics* and *Languages and Professions*, have helped me realize that I must consider learners’ proficiency levels, needs and motivation on the basis of various contexts when designing learning programs, curricula, and lesson plans. I have even had the opportunity to put my training into practice as a teacher. For my internship, I taught English in a non-profit organization. Through my experiences as a student, researcher, and teacher, I have come to understand that there is always a gap between theory and practice and that I can no longer assume a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

In addition to my academic background, I have also been influenced by the general atmosphere of language teaching and learning in my home country of Taiwan where English

has become the international language. The chances for people to use English have increased, and English-medium education is prevalent in Taiwan. There is a global trend in this development of English language skills. Often, the use of English is applied to different professional contexts in Taiwan and other countries where English is not the native language. In other words, the trend to develop language education to meet the needs of specific professions has recently become popular in Taiwan. This has led to the rapid expansion of English courses targeting specific disciplines. However, due to limited training programs and research projects, it seems that there are not enough qualified teachers to meet the demand for such specialized courses. I therefore would like to study discourse and collect linguistic data to analyze communication in various professional settings, as well as educational contexts where professional language is taught.

I have come to realize the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to teaching and research. To develop this understanding, I have taken numerous courses in linguistics, languages, psychology, and education in my undergraduate and graduate courses of study. Now, I am looking for the opportunity to continue my training and interdisciplinary research. For this reason, I am pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Linguistics at the ***, where I will be able to engage in research in an excellent academic environment where interdisciplinary research is apparent among the faculty.

With its combined training in theoretical and practical backgrounds, the Educational Linguistics Ph.D. program at the *** will help me develop my interests in research, teaching and applied linguistics. This program, with its renowned faculty and reputation in education and linguistics, is undoubtedly the best place for me to pursue further training. In this program, I will receive instruction from experts in cultural studies, language and acquisition, analysis of speech acts and discourse, language socialization and development, and policy analysis and evaluation. Being granted the opportunity to learn in this superb academic institution will allow me to develop a variety of skills that will better prepare me to achieve my goal of being a researcher, language educator, and policy maker par excellence, and although this program will undoubtedly present me with many challenges, my achievements and dedication demonstrate that I am prepared for this graduate program.

The Personal Statement by Anita

*(Notes: The mark of '***' in this text is the information protected by the researcher.)*

I am applying to the Ph.D. program in applied linguistics in order to broaden my perspective of language acquisition in L2 learners. More specifically, I am interested in English writing for specific purposes. English has emerged as a lingua franca, used as a communications medium in an increasingly global world, both in social and professional contexts. As a result, the need to write effectively and concisely in English has become urgent and necessary.

As a L2 learner and ESL teacher, I observed many challenges that students encountered when they were writing essays for specific subjects. I realized that to become successful writers in a given discipline, learners not only need to acculturate to the discipline, but also have to learn the most effective and appropriate language structures per that correspond to institutional convention. Particularly in professional contexts, there is a high expectation for well-written English. In order to help students successfully participate in a target community, I desire to specialize in language research, focusing on providing learners with language education to meet the requirements.

My goal for studying applied linguistics is to help L2 learners to reduce their learning difficulty with regard to language and cultural acquisition. Given my strong interest in L2

writing, I desire to explore prescriptive guidelines for teaching writing in professional contexts, and to help students to meet those expectations while retaining their unique individual voices. Specifically, I want to analyse varieties of L2 learners' writing and examine specific ways of writing in order to explore practical implications for classroom pedagogy.

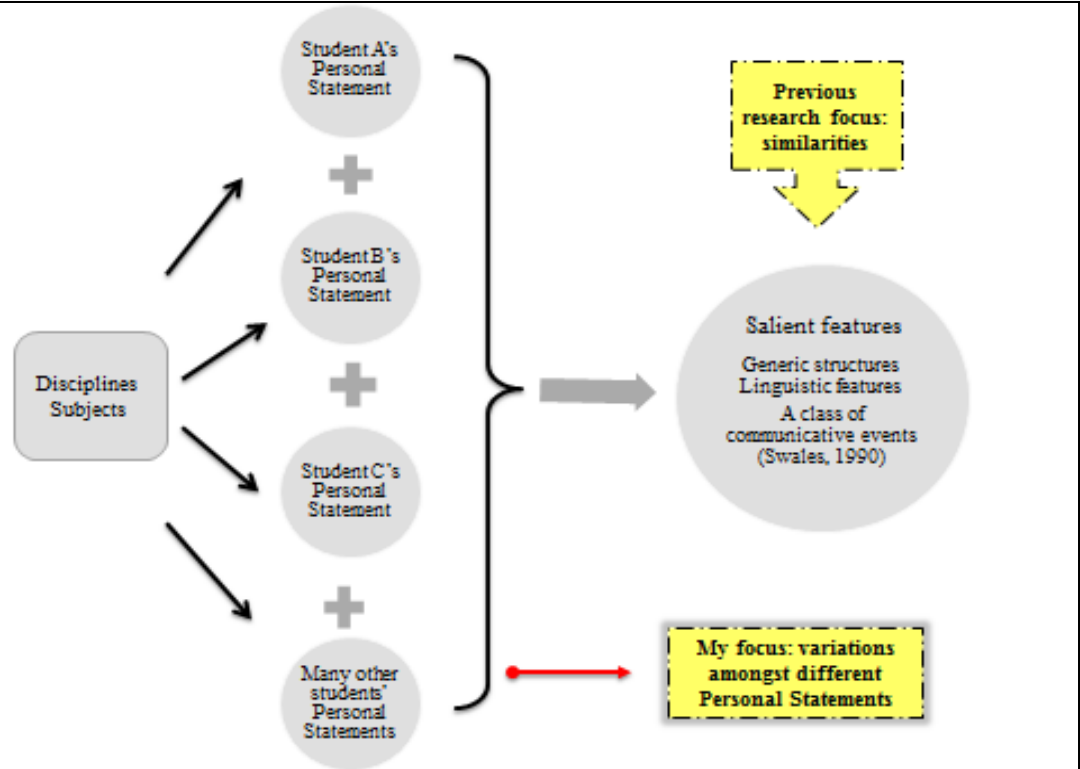
Two research projects that I have done during my Master studies have greatly influenced me. My study on *Teachers' Question Style in Classroom Interaction* gave me the opportunity to experience the challenges of collecting and analyzing data and to devise proper procedures for objective interpretation. Particularly, I recognized that merely looking at linguistic features without considering para-linguistic functions, one could be led to mislabel. My second research project investigated students' writing process when they received professional help from a professor and further sheds light on how to help students engage in the writing process by providing feedback via different modes of meaning negotiation. This study indicates that negotiation of meaning may reduce the potential chances of miscommunication and it will be presented at AAAL (2009) in Denver, Colorado. I hope that this achievement would contribute to further knowledge in English Language and Teaching and help to underscore my commitment to the study of applied linguistics.

Through my study of TESOL, I have observed how language serves as a medium for mutual understanding and as a means for the appreciation of cultural differences. I realized that research in language and education is multidisciplinary: it blends elements of socio- and psycho- linguistics, a consideration for cultural phenomena, and also a practical teaching pedagogy. Language teachers with knowledge of different teaching approaches and a strong linguistic background are more likely to design lessons that are well-suited to students' needs. I also learned, through consideration of the cultural aspects of language, how linguistics is used to bridge connections between society and language, and how people's use of language differs across social and regional variations. This study has enabled me to look into the underlying cultural dynamics of language use and has provided me with diverse perspectives on teaching and research strategies.

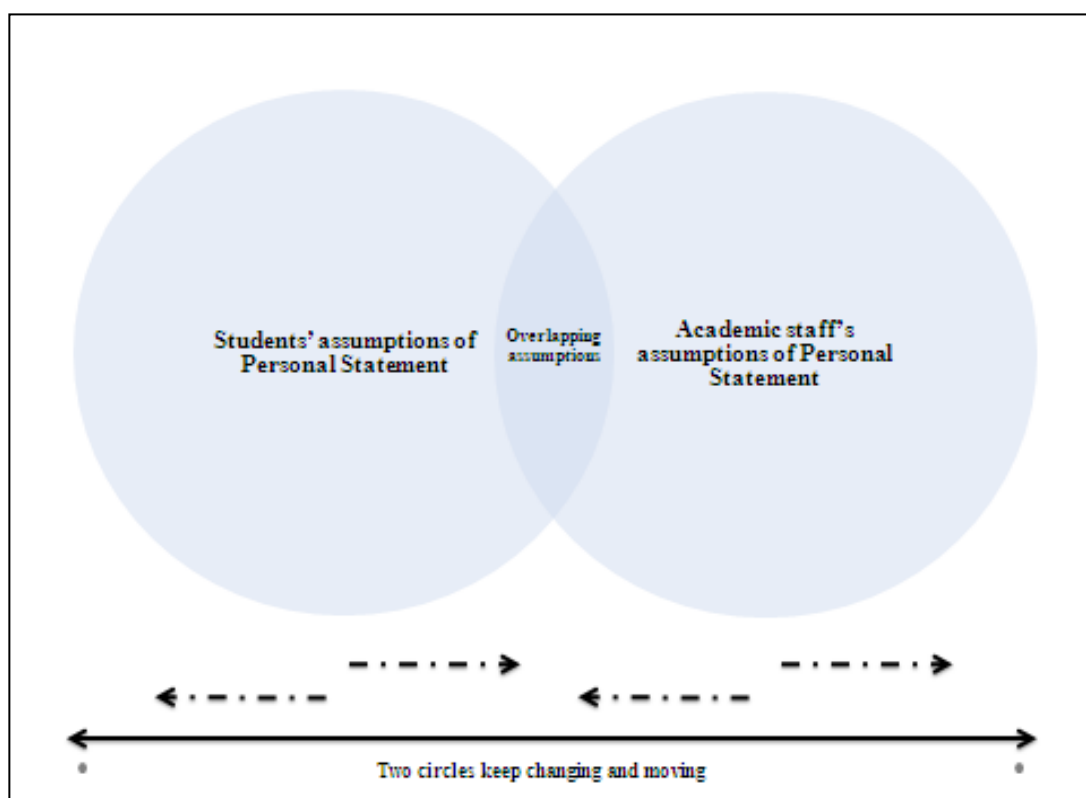
As my final thesis project toward my Master's in TESOL degree, I taught English as a Second Language at a non-profit center geared toward recent immigrants and refugees. The project helped me to analyse my teaching systematically, to clarify my understanding of teaching theories, and to better understand the relationship between theory and practice. I became more aware of the danger of over-generalizing theories, since each classroom is unique, and I also became more sensitive to students' individual differences before bringing my teaching philosophy into practice. This merging of theory and practice gave me insight into how to develop a pedagogy that could be implemented effectively in a classroom environment.

The Ph.D. program at *** University is particularly attractive to me because of its dedication to examining a variety of linguistic phenomena through various models of analysis. With your excellent faculty as well as its reputation for education, I would gain a solid foundation in linguistics and research methodology. I am intrigued by Dr. ***'s research on teachers' intentions and learners' perceptions about oral corrective feedback. Particularly, I am interested in exploring parallels to this research from a writing perspective. As a researcher with a broad background in theoretical linguistics, TESOL pedagogy, and practical teaching experience, I would be a productive Ph.D. candidate and make my own contribution to your program.

Appendix 3 – Figure 1.1 My research focus vs. Existing studies on PSs



Appendix 4 – Figure 1.2 Unstable genre: Personal Statements



Appendix 5 – Student interview guideline

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR UK STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Guideline Questions

Tiffany Chiu, 2010

The interviews with students will comprise three methods of interaction: (1) general questions related to their AT writing and the revision processes; (2) specific text-based interviews (the interview questions will be designed upon completion of my analysis of the ATs) will be conducted; (3) experts' feedback data provided by the students. The interview questions will be based on themes deriving from the first stage of the data analysis as well as the concepts that emerge from the existing literatures, and my own personal experiences of applying to institutions of study in the UK, and US and assisting other students with their ATs. Namely, the process of these interviews is *semi-structured*. This stage of the interviewing process will aim to gain a general understanding of the students' perception of ATs and the difficulties they faced during the writing process. Therefore, broad interview questions will be asked of students to enable them to express their experiences of writing. The key issues (working categories) to be explored in the interviews might include as follows:

☐ Opening

✓ATs: Admission Texts. The ATs include Personal Statements (PSs)/Statements of Purpose (SOPs) and Research Proposals (RPs).

- Purpose: I would like to ask you some questions about your AT writing experiences. If you have both PS and RP, I will ask you Qs about these two texts. However, if you have only one of them, either PS or RP will be focused on.
- Time line: The interview should take about 60 minutes. I will audio record the interview session only with your permission.

☐ Body

Section 1 - Demographics

- Your name is?
- Where are you from?
- Could you briefly mention your educational background to me? Where did you do your BA/MA/PhD?
- What language do you speak? Do you speak any languages besides English?

Section 2 – General Qs about students' perceptions of PS/RP

- What do you think are the most crucial/important elements of PS/RP in general?
- What contents do you think are important to include in your PS/RP?
- How do you think the importance of PS/RP in the postgraduate school applications?
- Which one is more important in the postgraduate school applications?
- What do you think the purpose of PS/RP for postgraduate study applications?
- What do you think your potential readers/admissions tutors would like to see from reading your PS/RP?

Section 3 – Student previous writing experiences

- Do you have any experiences of writing PS/RP before? If so, when did you write it and for what purposes? If not, have you ever written some texts that are related to PS/RP?
- Was there anyone or course teaching you how to write PS and RP before?

Section 4 – Assistance

- What sources did you use in the process of writing your PS/RP? (e.g., information from websites, your professors or friends)
- Did you find some template of PS/RP? Did you follow certain bullet points about the contents which should be included in your PS/RP?
- Did you try to find some guidelines from university's website, such as the admission requirement, or information about the PS/RP?
- Did you use any manuals to help you write your PS/RP? If so, what are they? Can I take a look them?
- What is the main source you used when you composed your PS/RP? If possible, can I take a look of them?
- Did you seek professional help? Could you describe the situation for me?
- Did you find other people to check/edit the language for you?
- What types of feedback did you receive during consultations with your professors/experts?
- How do you feel during consultation with your professors/experts? Did you find their suggestion/feedback helpful?

Section 5 – Writing difficulties/challenges

- What difficulties did you encounter while composing your PS/RP?
- Did you encounter different difficulties during the different stages of the writing process?
- What difficulties did you encounter while seeking professional help from the experts?

✓How are these difficulties reflected through varied textual features in the ATs? (*For the researcher*)

Section 6- Writing strategies (text-based features: voice, identity, content, language, etc)

✓The Qs in this section are varied based on different student participants.

- How did you start with your research topic/ideas? Based on your previous research experiences? MA thesis?
- How did you compose your PS/RP in the writing process?
- How did you structure your PS/RP? Could you briefly explain to me? Show me in your PS/RP.
- Have you ever considered your potential audiences/admissions tutors when you wrote your PS/RP?
- Did you write for a particular audience/supervisor/professor?
- What image you would like to give to your potential audiences/admissions tutors? How did you want to be “sound like” via reading your PS/RP?
- What are other strategies that you utilized while composing your PS/RP?

✓What voices and identities you were adopting in your PS/RP? (*For the researcher*)

✓How do you position yourself in the PS/RP so as to persuade the readers you have the required qualities and potentials to study the proposed programme? (*For the researcher*)

Section 7 – The comparison between PS and RP

- Did you compose your PS first or RP?
- What do you think these two documents? Do they complement each other?
- Do you think these two texts connect with each other? If so, how?

Section 8 – Other

- Is there anything you would like to comment on?

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR US STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Guideline Questions

Tiffany Chiu, 2010

The interviews with students will comprise three methods of interaction: (1) general questions related to their AT writing and the revision processes; (2) specific text-based interviews (the interview questions will be designed upon completion of my analysis of the ATs) will be conducted; (3) experts' feedback data provided by the students. The interview questions will be based on themes deriving from the first stage of the data analysis as well as the concepts that emerge from the existing literatures, and my own personal experiences of applying to institutions of study in the UK, and USA and assisting other students with their ATs. Namely, the process of these interviews is *semi-structured*. This stage of the interviewing process will aim to gain a general understanding of the students' perception of ATs and the difficulties they faced during the writing process. Therefore, broad interview questions will be asked of students to enable them to express their experiences of writing. The key issues (working categories) to be explored in the interviews might include as follows:

□ Opening

- ATs: Admission Texts. The ATs here are 'statements of purpose' or called 'personal statement'.
- Purpose: I would like to ask you some questions about your writing experiences of statement of purpose and your perceptions on this type of text.
- Time line: The interview should take about 60 minutes. I will audio record the interview session only with your permission.

Application documents for US doctoral programme applications (generally speaking): 1) application form; 2) a statement of purpose; 3) résumé; 4) three letters of recommendation; 5) an official copy of your standardised test scores: GRE (Graduate Record Examination), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language – for international students), or IELTS (International English Language Testing System); 6) academic transcripts (from all higher education institutions the applicant has attended); 7) writing samples?

□ Body

Section 1 - Demographics

- Your name is?
- Where are you from?
- Could you briefly mention your educational background to me? Where did you do your BA/MA/PhD?
- What language do you speak? Do you speak any languages besides English?
- Which year are you in your doctoral study?

Section 2 – General questions about students' perceptions of admission documents

- Amongst the admissions documents, which document do you think the most important?
- What do you think the 'statement of purpose' compared with other admissions documents such as academic transcripts, letters of recommendation, etc?
- How do you think the importance of 'statements of purpose' in the doctoral school applications?
- Do you think the academic transcripts and official TOEFL/GRE score important in the application documents?
- Do you think letters of recommendation is important?
- What do you think the resume in the application?

Section 3 – General questions about students’ perceptions of ‘statement of purpose’

- What do you think the purpose of ‘statements of purpose’ for doctoral study applications?
- What do you think are the most important elements of ‘statements of purpose’ in general?
- What contents do you think are important to include in your ‘statements of purpose’?
- What do you think your potential readers/admissions tutors would like to see from reading your ‘statements of purpose’?

Section 4 – Student previous writing experiences of ‘statements of purpose’

- Do you have any experiences of writing ‘statements of purpose’ before you applied for the doctoral study? If so, when did you write it and for what purposes? If not, have you ever written some texts that are related to ‘statements of purpose’?
- Was there anyone or course teaching you how to write ‘statements of purpose’ before?

Section 5 – Assistance

- What sources did you use in the process of writing your ‘statements of purpose’? (e.g., information from websites, your professors or friends’ ‘statements of purpose’?)
- What is the main source you used when you composed your ‘statements of purpose’? If possible, could I take a look of them?
- Did you try to find some guidelines from university’s website, such as the admission requirement, or information about the ‘statements of purpose’? Is the instruction clear from the website?
- Did you find some template of ‘statements of purpose’? Did you follow certain bullet points about the contents which should be included in your ‘statements of purpose’?
- Did you seek professional help? Could you describe the situation for me?
- What types of feedback did you receive during consultations with your professors/experts?
- What difficulties did you encounter while seeking professional help from the experts?
- How do you feel during consultation with your professors/experts?
- Did you find their suggestion/feedback helpful?
- Did you find other people to check/edit the language for you?

Section 6 – Writing difficulties/challenges

- What difficulties did you encounter while composing your ‘statements of purpose’?
- Did you encounter different difficulties during the different stages of the writing process?

Section 7 – Writing strategies (text-based features: voice, identity, content, language, etc)

The Qs in this section are varied based on different student participants.

- How did you start when you composed your ‘statements of purpose’?
- How did you compose your ‘statements of purpose’ in the writing process?
- How did you structure your ‘statements of purpose’? Could you briefly explain to me? Could you show me in your ‘statements of purpose’?
- Have you ever considered your potential audiences/admissions tutors when you wrote your ‘statements of purpose’?
- Did you write for a particular audience/professor?

- What image you would like to give to your potential audiences/admissions tutors?
- What are other strategies that you utilized while composing your ‘statements of purpose’?

Section 8 – Other

- Is there anything you would like to comment on?

Appendix 6 – Academic interview guideline

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR UK ACADEMIC PARTICIPANTS

Guideline Questions

Tiffany Chiu, June 2010

The interview with the admissions tutors comprises two methods of interaction: (1) general questions related to admissions tutors' perceptions of Admission Texts; and (2) admissions tutors' comment/feedback on students' Admission Texts. Some of the selective Admission Texts will be sent to these admissions tutors for evaluation before the interviews. The interview questions will be based on themes deriving from the first stage of the analysis of students' Admission Texts as well as the concepts that emerge from the existing literatures. The process of these interviews is semi-structured. This stage of the interviewing process will aim to gain a general understanding of the admissions tutors' perceptions of Admission Texts and to investigate how different institutional epistemologies influence these texts in terms of the evaluation process. A series of broad interview questions will be asked of admissions tutors to enable them to express their perceptions of Admission Texts and experiences of evaluating the Admission Texts. The key issues (working categories) to be explored in the interviews might include as follows:

Key issues to be explored:

Opening: this interview focuses on your perceptions of students' admission texts. I am referring to the personal statements and research proposals here. Also, I am interested in your experiences of evaluating these texts. This interview includes two sections: (1) your perception of admission documents. I will mainly focus on personal statement and research proposal; (2) your feedback/comments on the personal statements and research proposal I sent you earlier. This interview will last around 30 – 60 minutes. I will record this session.

❑ Section 1 – Admissions tutors' perception of admission documents

General admission process

1. Could you briefly describe how students' Admission documents for MPhil/PhD application at the university are evaluated in the admission process? (Mysterious process for me!)
2. In general, is there a preferred order in which you read a student's application document? (e.g., which one you would read/consider first? Postgraduate application form? Official transcript (academic marks)? Personal statement? Research proposal?)
3. Which admission documents do you think the most important in the MPhil/PhD applications at the university?
4. What do you think are the most important elements for the potential MPhil/PhD students to gain places in this department (Education and Professional Studies)? (*The response to this question does not need to be confined in Personal statement/Research proposal.*)

Comparative questions on 'what's more important'

1. When you evaluate students' Admission Texts, what connection do you see between Personal statement and Research proposal?
2. In terms of admission documents for MPhil/PhD applications, which document is more important, Personal statement or Research proposal?

Detailed questions on individual parts

1. How do you evaluate students' Admission Texts (Personal statement/Research proposal)? Could you briefly describe your evaluation process of these two documents?
2. Did you follow any standard institutional criteria when evaluating students' Personal statement/Research proposal? If so, what is it? Where does it come from? (Checklist?) From the university?

3. Are there any word limits for the Personal statement/Research proposal?
4. In the process of evaluation, will you discuss your ideas/thoughts about students' Personal statement and Research proposal with your colleagues (other department/academics)? If so, could you briefly describe the process/situation?
5. What do you expect to see when reading applicants' Personal statement/Research proposal? You can comment these two documents separately.
6. What are your priorities when you read applicants' Personal statement/Research proposal? (*The following are some potential options. Admission tutors can respond freely.*)
 - Relationship to your own field of interest and that of the department
 - Content: background? Knowledge of programmes? Career goals?
 - Organization of content?
 - Discourse strategies used?
 - Accuracy of grammar, syntax, mechanics? (e.g., language issues)
 - Interesting style of writing?
 - Other aspects?
7. What do you think are the most crucial/important elements/contents of Personal statement/Research proposal in general?
8. What do you think the importance of *Personal statement/Research proposal* in the postgraduate school applications compared with other application documents such as official transcripts, scores, etc?
9. Is student's academic mark important in the admission application?

❑ Section 2 – Admissions tutors' comment/feedback on students' Admission Texts (Research proposal and Personal statement)

1. What do you think of the Personal statement/Research proposal I sent you earlier before this meeting? Any comments on their: (*The following points are just some guided categories. Admission tutors can respond freely.*)
 - Relationship to your own field of interest and that of the department
 - Content?
 - Organization of content?
 - Discourse strategies used?
 - Accuracy of grammar, syntax, mechanics? (e.g., language issues)
 - Interesting style of writing?
 - Other aspects?
2. The Personal statements are from two students. What do you think these two personal statements? Which one do you like better? Which one is more attractive to you?
3. What do you think this research proposal?

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR US ACADEMIC PARTICIPANTS

Guideline Questions

Tiffany Chiu, Sept. – Oct., 2010

The interview with the admissions tutors comprises two methods of interaction: (1) general questions related to admissions tutors' perceptions of Admission Texts; and (2) admissions tutors' comment/feedback on students' Admission Texts. Some of the selective Admission Texts will be sent to these admissions tutors for evaluation before the interviews. The interview questions will be based on themes deriving from the first stage of the analysis of students' Admission Texts as well as the concepts that emerge from the existing literatures. The process of these interviews is semi-structured. This stage of the interviewing process will aim to gain a general understanding of the admissions tutors' perceptions of Admission Texts and to investigate how different institutional epistemologies influence these texts in terms of the evaluation process. A series of broad interview questions will be asked of admissions tutors to enable them to express their perceptions of Admission Texts and experiences of evaluating the Admission Texts. The key issues (working categories) to be explored in the interviews might include as follows:

Key issues to be explored:

Opening: this interview focuses on your perceptions of students' admission texts. I am referring to the statement of purpose here. Also, I am interested in your experiences of evaluating these texts. This interview includes two sections: (1) your perception of admission documents. I will mainly focus on statement of purpose; (2) your feedback/comments on the statement of purpose I sent you earlier. This interview will last around 30 – 60 minutes. I will record this session.

□ Section 1 – Admissions tutors' perception of admission documents

Application documents for US doctoral programme applications (general speaking): 1) application form; 2) a statement of purpose; 3) résumé; 4) three letters of recommendation; 5) an official copy of your standardised test scores: GRE (Graduate Record Examination), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language – for international students), or IELTS (International English Language Testing System); 6) academic transcripts (from all higher education institutions the applicant has attended); 7) writing samples?

General admission process

1. Could you briefly describe how students' admission documents for PhD application at the university are evaluated in the admission process?
2. In general, is there a preferred order in which you read a student's application document? (e.g., which one you would read/consider first? doctoral application form? academic transcripts/GRE/TOEFL scores? statement of purpose? résumé? letters of recommendation?)
3. Is a writing sample necessary for PhD application at the university?
4. Among the application documents, which admission documents do you think the most important in the PhD applications at the university?
5. What do you think are the most important elements for the potential PhD students to gain places in this department?
6. During the admissions period, are there many applicants contacting you for some advice or expressing their motivation to study in this institution?

Detailed questions on individual parts:

In this section, I will mainly focus on the document of 'statement of purpose'.

1. I am wondering whether there is any difference between the terms 'personal statement' and 'statement of purpose', in your perception.

2. Do you think the instruction for writing a statement of purpose is clear on university's website? (*provide university's instruction of writing a 'statement of purpose'*)
3. How do you evaluate students' 'statements of purpose'? Could you briefly describe your evaluation process of this document?
4. What are your priorities when you read applicants' statements of purpose?
(*The following are some categories. There is no need to respond based on these categories.*)
 - Relationship to your own field of interest and that of the department
 - Content: background? Knowledge of programmes? Career goals?
 - Organization of content?
 - Accuracy of grammar, syntax, mechanics? (e.g., language issues)
 - Interesting style of writing?
 - Other aspects?
5. What do you expect to see when reading applicants' statement of purpose?
6. What do you think are the most important elements/contents of students' statements of purpose in general?
7. Did you follow any standard institutional criteria when evaluating students' statements of purpose? If so, what is it? Is it from *** department?
8. Are there any word limits for the statements of purpose? If the statement of purpose over the word limit, would it be a concern in the evaluation process?
9. In the process of evaluation, will you discuss your ideas/thoughts about students' statements of purpose with your colleagues (other department/academics)? If so, could you briefly describe the situation?
10. What do you think the importance of statements of purpose in the doctoral programme applications compared with other application documents such as academic transcripts, an official copy of your standardised test scores, etc?
11. Is student's academic transcript important in the admission application?
12. Is the letter of recommendation important in the admissions process?
13. Is the GRE/TOFEL score important in the admissions process?
14. Is the résumé important in the admissions process?

❑ Section 2 – Admissions tutors' comment/feedback on students' statements of purpose

1. What do you think of the statements of purpose I sent you earlier before the interview?
Any comments on their:
(*The following points are just some guided categories. Admission tutors can respond freely.*)
 - Relationship to your own field of interest and that of the department
 - Content?
 - Organization of content?
 - Accuracy of grammar, syntax, mechanics? (e.g., language issues)
 - Interesting style of writing?
- Other aspects?

Appendix 7 – James’ Personal Statements

*(Notes: The mark of ‘***’ in this text is the information protected by the researcher.)*

Statement of purpose

Teaching math to students in urban settings has proven to be an amazing challenge. While the success that I have experienced has encouraged me to persist in this endeavor, the frustrations and complications that I have encountered have defined my interests and career goals. Curricular materials that are conceptually rich and expose the relevance and urgency of math to students are necessary to successfully equip students with the mathematical, technological and critical reasoning skills necessary for success in contemporary society. Providing these materials to teachers remains an elusive goal in many schools around the country, especially in urban settings where it is most needed. Existing curricula leave much more room for improvement and often the most promising materials are out of reach to many teachers due to financial and policy-related obstacles. On a classroom level, significant effort and skill is required to supplement or adapt the available materials and even more so to successfully implement them with a particular set of students. Additionally, to fully realize student potential, an analysis of the circumstances of the community surrounding the schools must be performed and the available resources must be tapped. My experiences have led to an intense desire to expand my expertise regarding curriculum and instruction and to more fully understand the issues involved in placing school within context of the larger community in hopes that I might contribute to the knowledge base surrounding these topics and make advantages towards solving the problems therein. My future goals include joining a faculty of teacher educators and using my expertise in curriculum and instruction to promote critical mathematical thinking in urban classrooms.

Having spent most of my teaching career in a small, public charter school, I have first-hand knowledge of how a limited budget affects a schools’ ability to obtain curricular materials for student use in the classroom. At *** School, where I began my teaching, there was little money for textbooks and I was forced to create much of the content used in my classes. Given my relative inexperience at that time, I found myself drawing from a broad variety of resources that I otherwise may never have encountered. Despite the lack of classroom resources, a professional library with literature focusing on school reform contained the Principles and Standards for School Mathematics set by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics; this guidebook provided my first glimpse into the national movement towards mathematics reform. Instruction that focused on student understanding, application of real life problem situations, and communication of mathematical ideas answered the complaints I had with my own, more traditional math education. Not surprisingly, the ideas presented in this document were nowhere to be found between the covers of old textbooks that were lying around the school. Guided by the “standards” and using a host of internet and print resources, I worked to fulfill the goal of selecting and creating course materials that were relevant and accessible to the wide range of cultural backgrounds and skill levels of the students in my classes. I gauged the success of my lessons not only with standard assessments but also the feel of the classroom as students discovered their own ideas about how math works and fits together. The standards proved to be valuable criteria for curricular development; lessons containing familiar problem situations that encouraged student inquiry and discourse empowered students in a way that more traditional, didactic instruction focusing on more abstract ideas could not.

My initial teaching experience was followed by a yearlong internship through *** University’s MAT program, where I was introduced to a curriculum that was based on the NCTM standards and funded by the National Science Foundation, specifically, the Contemporary Mathematics in Context developed out of the Core-Plus Mathematics Project. I immediately regarded this curriculum as progress in the field of mathematics education and

enthusiastically planned to incorporate these materials into my own classroom. When the internship ended, I returned to the charter school and, using older edition textbooks saved from being thrown away by one of the district schools in the area, I taught an Algebra course using Contemporary Mathematics in Context materials. My excitement was tempered when I found that the materials, in the way that they were presented in the student texts, were inaccessible to many of the students in my class due to limitations in the students' varying levels of proficiency in reading the text, and I found myself creating activities that were based on what was provided, but heavily modified to allow for accessibility.

A geographical move to Philadelphia prompted me to seek a position at an urban school with proven success, especially in regard to students' mathematics achievement. I obtained a position at *** Philadelphia *** School where I have been teaching for the past four months. The existing curriculum is traditional in nature consisting of a "classic" algebra textbook and I once again find myself creating standards-based curricular materials to supplement the textbook.

As I have spent countless hours developing my own curriculum materials to bridge the gap between my students and both traditional and standards-based curriculum materials, I have developed a desire to learn more about not only curriculum design theory but also the relationship between curriculum and instruction and the role that teachers play in adapting materials for use with the students they teach. I am especially interested in how teachers read classroom circumstances, including students' mathematical and interpersonal skill-sets, experience with inquiry based learning, and general interests, then adapt curriculum to make it more relevant to the students they teach. Through professional literature and conferences, I have familiarized myself with current research into the role of relevancy in the mathematics classroom, taking special interest in the idea of promoting social justice through the teaching of mathematics. These issues seem to provide a valuable way to demonstrate the relevance of mathematics and spur the interest of urban students and students of color who find themselves victims of injustice.

While the quality of the materials used in a classroom are essential, their effectiveness is either limited or heightened during instructional time. Highly skilled instructors are especially crucial in urban settings where achievement has historically been lower and where many students have experienced either a lack of either interest or success in school. Reflection on my own instruction has been predominantly based on the challenge of introducing students, many of whom are accustomed to more traditional mathematics instruction, to the importance of mathematical communication and constructing meaning within their own preexisting conceptual framework. The role of motivation and students' feelings of self-efficacy are key in those moments when frustration either leads to persistence or to giving up, and I have had varied success at helping to develop these qualities in a given class or with individual students. At times, I have watched in awe as classrooms of students who have historically struggled develop and evaluate their own solutions to problem situations through rich discourse, aided only by my facilitation of idea transfer. On the other hand, I have had my experiences with students whose frustration has led them to exclaim "just give us the answer!" Further study into instructional techniques that lead to effective teaching is essential both for my own practice and for those that I hope to mentor in the art of teaching.

Although an urban community provides sufficient challenges for those involved in curriculum planning and instruction, there are unique educational opportunities present in these communities which, if understood, can enhance student learning. The social factors affecting success and the varied learning experiences present as the student maneuvers from school, home, and within in the larger community must be studied so that their positive influence on student learning can be realized. Despite the fact I have realized the importance

of these considerations, methods of identifying and taking advantages of these considerations have not always been easily determined. Through further study of these topics, I hope to integrate them into my understanding of all that an educator can do to maximize effectiveness.

Few would dispute the fact that mathematics education in urban classrooms needs to be improved; my experiences have led me to believe that it is possible and have shed some light on what can be done. Contributing to this improvement and achieving my personal career goals will require enrollment in a doctoral program that is focused on curriculum and instruction in urban classrooms and placing the classroom within the context of the community. After familiarizing myself with the available courses and speaking with Dr. *** specifically about the research that she and current doctoral candidates are pursuing through the Teaching, Learning and Curriculum program at *** (the name of the school this applicant is applying for), it seems that the school is a natural match for my interests. Coursework and research opportunities would provide exposure to methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis, which will allow me to design my own studies on the topics I have explained above. It is my hope that through these studies and my instruction, I will aid future mathematics educators in providing the top quality mathematics education that their students require.

Appendix 8 – Sample of information sheet (in recruiting student and academic participants)



INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

REC Protocol Number: **REP (EM)/09/10-3**

University of London

Title of study: Academic Literacies Study of Admission Texts for Postgraduate School Applications: Students' Voices and Identities, and Power Relations across Cultural and Institutional Contexts

Dear Student,

I would like to invite you to participate in my doctoral research. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If there is anything that is not clear or you would like more information about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me. My contact details are at the end of this information sheet.

Aims of the research

The aim of this research is to investigate students' Admission Texts (ATs – Personal statement or Statement of Purpose) for postgraduate school applications to the UK and the US. In this study, I will investigate how students position themselves while composing their ATs. I will also examine the AT writing practices such as the difficulties students encountered in the process of writing. Apart from the investigation from students' perspectives, I will explore the views of the admissions tutors who evaluate students' ATs.

Who I am recruiting?

This study will recruit around 30 doctoral students from the two participant institutions – one in the UK and the other in the US, experts who helped students with their ATs, and the admissions tutors who evaluate students' ATs from the two participant educational institutions.

What will happen if you decide to participant in this research?

If you would like to take part in this research, you will be asked to send your ATs (if possible, including different drafts in the process of writing) and may be contacted for an interview. The time and place for interview will be arranged by emails with you. The interviews will be through face-to-face meetings, online meetings, telephone interviews or email communications. The time and place for interviews is prioritised to your convenience. The interview with you will last around 60 minutes. I will audio record the interview session only with your permission.

Possible benefits

This research will benefit students, instructors, and admissions tutors in terms of AT writing and practices. Some issues and implications brought up from this study will merit the general development of genre theory, pedagogy, and literacy practices.

Arrangements for ensuring anonymity and confidentiality

- ✓ A decision to withdraw up to the submission date of my dissertation at the end of January, 2011, or a decision not to take part, will not affect the standard of care/ education you receive.

- ✓ If you agree to take part you will be asked whether you are happy to be contacted about participation in future studies. Your participation in this study will not be affected should you choose not to be re-contacted.
- ✓ You may withdraw your data from the project at any time up until it is transcribed for use in the final report.
- ✓ If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

Contact details

If you have any questions you can contact me via email at yuan-li.chiu@kcl.ac.uk or my supervisor Professor Constant Leung, Department of Education and Professional Studies, Franklin Wilkins Building, Waterloo Bridge Wing, King's College London, London SE1 9NH, Tel: +44 (0)20 7848 3713, Email: constant.leung@kcl.ac.uk

INFORMATION SHEET FOR ACADEMIC PARTICIPANTS



REC Protocol Number: REP (EM)/09/10-3

University of London

Title of study: Academic Literacies Study of Admission Texts for Postgraduate School Applications: Students' Voices and Identities, and Power Relations across Cultural and Institutional Contexts

Dear Academic,

I would like to invite you to participate in my doctoral research. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. If there is anything that is not clear or you would like more information about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me. My contact details are at the end of this information sheet.

Aims of the research

The aim of this research is to investigate students' Admission Texts⁸ (ATs) for postgraduate school applications to the UK and the US. In this study, I will investigate how students position themselves while composing their ATs. Furthermore, I will examine the AT writing practices such as the difficulties students encountered in the process of writing. Apart from the investigation from students' perspectives, I will also explore the views of the experts who helped students with their AT writing and admissions tutors who evaluate these texts.

Who I am recruiting?

This study will recruit 20 - 30 doctoral students from the two participant institutions – one in the UK and the other in the US, experts who helped students with their ATs, and the admissions tutors who evaluate students' ATs from the two participant educational institutions.

What will happen if you decide to participant in this research?

If you agree to take part in this research, you will be contacted for an interview. In the interview, you will be asked to express your experiences when evaluated students' ATs and also to express your perception of this particular text. Also, some students' ATs will be sent to you before the interview. Some questions concerning these texts will be asked during the interview. The time and place for interview will be arranged by emails with you. The interviews will be through face-to-face meetings, online meetings, telephone interviews or email communications. The time and place for interviews is prioritised to your convenience. The interview with you will last around 30-60 minutes. I will audio record the interview session only with your permission.

Any risks

All the personal information collected in this research will be for research purposes and will not be disclosed to a third party.

Possible benefits

⁸ The Admission Texts here refer to 'Personal statements' and 'Research proposals' submitted by student applicants for MPhil/PhD programme application in the UK.

This research will benefit students, instructors, and admissions tutors in terms of AT writing and practices. Some issues and implications brought up from this study will merit the general development of genre theory, pedagogy, and literacy practices.

Arrangements for ensuring anonymity and confidentiality

- ✓ A decision to withdraw up to the submission date of my dissertation at the end of January, 2011, or a decision not to take part, will not affect the standard of care/ education you receive.
- ✓ If you agree to take part you will be asked whether you are happy to be contacted about participation in future studies. Your participation in this study will not be affected should you choose not to be re-contacted.
- ✓ You may withdraw your data from the project at any time up until it is transcribed for use in the final report.
- ✓ If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

Contact details

If you have any questions you can contact me via email at yuan-li.chiu@kcl.ac.uk or my supervisor Professor Constant Leung, Department of Education and Professional Studies, Franklin Wilkins Building, Waterloo Bridge Wing, King's College London, London SE1 9NH, Tel: +44 (0)20 7848 3713, Email: constant.leung@kcl.ac.uk

Appendix 9 – Participant Consent Form



Title of Study: Academic Literacies Study of Admission Texts for Postgraduate School Applications: Students' Voices and Identities, and Power Relations across Cultural and Institutional Contexts

King's College Research Ethics Committee Ref: REP (EM)/09/10-3

- Thank you for considering taking part in this research. Please note that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify you from any publications.
- If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please feel free to contact the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.
- I understand that if I decide at any other time during the research that I no longer wish to participate in this project, I can notify the researchers involved and be withdrawn from it immediately without giving any reason. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to the point of publication or up until the point stated on the Information Sheet.
- I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be treated in accordance with the terms of the Data Protection Act 1998.
- I agree to be contacted in the future by King's College London researchers who would like to invite me to participate in follow up studies to this project, or in future studies of a similar nature.
- I agree that the researcher may use my data for future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee.

Participant's Statement:

I _____ agree that the research project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part in the study. I have read both the notes written above and the Information Sheet about the project, and understand what the research study involves.

Researcher's Statement:

I _____ confirm that I have carefully explained the nature, demands and foreseeable risks (where applicable) of the proposed research to the volunteer.

Signed _____ Date _____

Appendix 10 – Samples of student and academic interview transcripts

UK student participant – Anna's interview transcript

*(Notes: The mark of '***' in this text is the information protected by the researcher.)*

INT: This interview will be conducted around 30 – 45 minutes. It depends on your responses. If you have any questions, you can stop me anytime. I will briefly mention about the purpose of this interview first and then I will ask you questions about your Personal Statement and then move to the Research proposal.

INT: So, could you tell me again where you are from?

Anna: I am from Cyprus.

INT: Thank you. I want to know your educational background. Where did you do your undergraduate?

Anna: In Cyprus. The University of ***. The language is Greek. This year is my second in England. I did my Master at ***. Language Ethnicity & Education Last year, I am here (at ***).

INT: Ok. I want to ask you some questions about your general perceptions of your Personal Statement.

Anna: OK.

INT: So, what do you think are the most crucial elements in your Personal Statement when you applied for *** PhD?

Anna: In my personal or in general? My Personal Statement?

INT: Yeah, in general. Your general ideas about what the most important parts you think you need to include in your Personal Statement.

Anna: OK, about the education, where your BA was, maybe what modules you did. For me, because I am a teacher, in this point means that if I have a teaching experience, working experience. They think it is also very important to try to show them your personality, not just, I did that, I did that. So, that's the reason why I included some of my activities beyond education.

INT: I see. So you found the most important thing is that because it's a personal so it's not only listed your past academic experiences but also other activities.

Anna: You have to, yes, you have to mention your educational background but also try to show them your personality.

INT: I see.

Anna: It's difficult to express but I tried to...

INT: Mhm...so what kind of the contents you choose to include when you wrote this one?

Anna: Ehm...

INT: I read your Personal Statement and then I found you include your teaching experiences as a teacher and then your past research experiences and your activities. So, I am interested in the selection of these contents.

Anna: OK, ehm...why I selected these?

INT: Yes, because when you started, there were so many ideas but the space is quite limited. So, I am curious how you selected these contents and the process.

Anna: Ehm...I believe this is what they expect you to write. I included my education in the University of *** and some of the courses I did that are relevant with what I am trying to do now... was relevant with my Mphil from the second language teaching. My Mphil is about teaching Greek language as a second language. Ehm...I also included my research, research interest, the research project that I did because it's important to know that you did research. You know something about the research since you are going to be the research student here. Ehm...what else...yes I also my teaching experiences...which I also found an important qualification for me. As I told you, I also include some of the activities I did in general. I don't believe this is so important to put in your Personal Statement but I did it in order to express my personal character. So, I did something which they expect me to do. For

instance, education, module, research experiences, teaching experiences, and some other things.

INT: Interesting! How do you value this document? I mean compared to the research proposal, because these are two documents which *** requires. You have to write your research proposal and Personal Statement for application. Do you think this document is much more important than the research proposal or...?

Anna: As regard to the Mphil/PhD application, I believe the research proposal is more important than the Personal Statement. For me, the research proposal is more important also because my supervisors already knew something about me so he already knew about my interests, my teaching experiences, maybe my personality. I believe that the Research Proposal is more important.

INT: So you mentioned that you already know your potential audience, I mean your supervisor when you applied for ***.

Anna: Yes, because I did my Master here. I did my dissertation for my Master with John and Ross was my tutor. So, when I applied for the Mphil/PhD, I asked them if I can have the *** as my supervisor for my PhD. I think it's more important for him to see my research proposal rather than my Personal Statement.

INT: So you wrote to John? Said can you be my supervisor?

Anna: Yeah... but I did not tell him about my research proposal. I mentioned that I would like to do something similar with my dissertation as a PhD. But I did not mention anything else.

INT: So *** already knew your past research topic? Because he is your...

Anna: Ehm...the topic for my dissertation is similar with the topic for my PhD.

INT: So your supervisor already knew you quite well?

Anna: Not quite well, not very well. Because for the dissertation, you don't have many meetings. But he knew...he read some essays that I did. He also read my dissertation. So maybe he knew I did the Master. He knew my research interests. Ehm...

INT: So you basically wrote for him?

Anna: Yes, kind of. Yes...((laughing))

INT: Yeah, it's quite interesting because I am always interested in how the students write. And because if you have much clearer potential audiences, you know what direction you are toward to. But for the students in the US, they never ever access to any professor because I have the experiences. I wrote to them, none of them answered to me. So, kind of write to hundreds of unknown audiences.

Anna: Mhm...it's helpful to know your audience, right?

INT: Mhm...much easier.

Anna: Yeah, much easier and because he was also...he taught us some of the modules. We had modules. He was a lecturer for one or two three weeks. So I also knew his interests. Then, the academics that he prefers me to read and I will tell you later...because some of my proposal.

INT: Ok, do you have any writing previous experiences of writing your Personal Statement?

Anna: Ehm...I will tell you the truth, no, I don't. ((laughing)) Because I brought you my Personal Statement for my master. I don't have time to write this because I was very busy with my BA study. Language studies...Let's say...so I went to a company that prepares...

INT: In Cyprus?

Anna: Yeah, in Cyprus. Helps you with your application. And I told them some things that I want them to include in my Personal Statement. They wrote this. So, this is for my Master. And when I was going to apply for the Mphi I read this and I said: "Ehm...this is not me!" So I changed this. I had this as a...let's say...ehm...some things I wrote...the starting point...but I changed lots of things. So, you can have this for my Master.

INT: Thank you.

Anna: I don't have any other previous experiences. This is the first Personal Statement I wrote ((laughing)) because in Cyprus we don't need the Personal Statement to get into the college.

INT: you don't need...

Anna: No.

INT: So you basically provided some information to that agency and then they wrote for you. You did not write a draft.

Anna: No.

INT: So, they composed this...

Anna: Yes. Guess what happens...I was also...

INT: But the *** accept you though it's not you.

Anna: Yeah...a lot of people do that. Yeah, because I don't have time. I was actually...I was not confidence with my English at that time because in my BA, in the University of *** we used Greek. So they did that...and I brought to you. So we see how different this from this. Some points are the same, some paragraphs, some the same contents. But this is me.

INT: But why you feel this is not you?

Anna: I cannot remember what they wrote. ((laughing)) Ehm...

INT: The language they used?

Anna: Yes, the language, the way they wrote...

INT: And then the voice. Because you have your own way of writing but they have their own ways of writing. So you feel it's not me to write this...

Anna: Yeah, this is true. The ways she used, that girl used English is not me. And this paragraph is not me. The first paragraph is not me.

INT: I will read again and maybe I will ask you some questions. Interesting...

Anna: Ok.

INT: So this is the experiences before the PhD application? The Personal Statement...

Anna: Yes.

INT: So you don't have...do you have any courses to teach you how to write your Personal Statement?

Anna: No. Just from my experiences...I also...maybe I read some other Personal Statements that my friends wrote but nothing more, no any...not any course.

INT: Mhm...ok, so basically is that ehm...so that writing agency just helped you to write this. Did you take a look after they sent back to you?

Anna: This one?

INT: Yes.

Anna: Yes, I did check it but I did not have time to change it because I was very busy with my BA study. It's my final year. And we in Cyprus, in order to take the BA, in the last term, we have to work. We have courses; we also have to work in schools. So it was very busy. Busy time. And I want to apply as early as possible. Because I think you have more chances to be accepted.

INT: Because of deadline or something...

Anna: Yeah.

INT: So in terms of the Personal Statement...what do you think the most challenging elements when you wrote your Personal Statement?

Anna: My Master?

INT: No, for PhD. The Personal Statement.

Anna: The contents?

INT: The most challenging...the most difficult parts you found when you wrote your Personal Statement.

Anna: Oh yeah I see. In order to write. Ok, let's see. I think the most difficult thing was to include all these things I want to say within 3 pages. This is the most challenging.

INT: The limited space and include these and how to structure. Something like that?

Anna: Ehm...structure...because the structure I used was I think I remember was this structure. They have the same structure. They start with something - the introduction, my school years, then my BA undergraduate studies, courses, research experiences, then Master and end with my personal activities. So, the structure was not so difficult for me. But the challenging thing was to include all these things within the 3 pages limit. The limited space.

INT: Ok, so I am going to move to what kind of sources to help you to write. So, what kind of the sources did you use in the process of writing?

Anna: The Personal Statement?

INT: Yes Personal Statement.

Anna: This one. Nothing else. I cannot remember.

INT: From your friends?

Anna: Ehm...yes yes sorry I used this and I think one or two Personal Statements from my friends. And I also tried to find something in the Internet but I think this was more helpful.

INT: Mhm...so did you find some guidelines or like the bullet points, the key points which you have to write in terms of the Personal Statement in the [university] website?

Anna: Ehm...

INT: Did they mention something which stuffs you need to be included?

Anna: I did that for the research proposal but I did not do that for my Personal Statement. I cannot remember but I think I did not because I already have the Personal Statement so I just changed it. Just try to make it to look like "this is who I am". Because this has the same information. I gave them the information. I told them that I want you to talk about my school, my university, my research, my teaching. Just this way of writing is not me, this is not my voice. You can say that. So I just changed it. I just tried to write...

INT: For your PhD, you found this is not you for the PhD so you decided to rewrite?

Anna: Yes, this is not me. Ok the first paragraph is definitely not me. I erased it. Wait a minutes. In order to write this statement, I gave them some points that I want them to include, so except for this, all the other paragraphs is was me telling them what to do in Greek. So they wrote it. I believe it is the language she used that I did not like.

INT: Do you like this way? I am interested in some textual features. I did some textual analysis. Then I found it's like interesting quote in the beginning. Do you like this way? I thought it's your personal preference but you just mentioned this is from the agency, right? So they wrote this for you.

Anna: Ehm...this is me. I wrote that.

INT: Oh, so you wrote it? I thought is...

Anna: Yes

INT: So you wrote this like start with a quote?

Anna: No no, I did not tell her anything about that.

INT: So you wrote this?

Anna: No this... wait, I tell you again. I asked her to write my proposal and I told that girl to include that I was a good student in school. I was a very good student in school...let's say which is the same with the paragraph if you see. This is about my school years. I emphasise that I was good. Then this is about trying to gain a place in the University of *** because actually we have the entrance examination in the end of our secondary school. If we are good enough, we will get a place in University of ***. And I think she mentioned something like that here. And I told her to say that I am lucky to study in the University of *** and then some of the lessons I did. And I also did...yes...some kind of dissertations about teaching literature. So, I also told her to put this.

INT: Yeah, it's here.

Anna: Yes, literature. So for instance, this quote I gave them. I gave her this quote to put in. Ehm...ok, here, I have a paragraph about [the university] which I wrote new. You cannot find something similar here.

INT: This is new?

Anna: Yes. And then there were my activities. I also told her to write about these activities that I do. So, actually, this is me who structured the Personal Statement. I told her what I exactly try but I was not very confident with my English so that's why I did not write it. This was entirely her paragraph. This is not mine. This was her paragraph. This is not me.

INT: So it's hers?

Anna: This is the only thing that she wrote without me telling her. This is my structure, my idea but she used the English language. I actually sent her a draft in Greek so she just

translated some things and maybe put some other things, some sentences I don't like and I did not use here.

INT: So she just added something. Because you provided the script in Greek, saying I want to say this and that. So that girl helped you to translate or to put what you want to say in a coherent piece.

Anna: Yes, and first of all, she helped me to translate and to write. I also was not very...let's say, I don't really know how to write a Personal Statement. So I told her my ideas and I was expected from here to say me this draft in Greek cannot be a Personal Statement. But she did not say this. So, these are my ideas and her English translation. But in this paragraph, it's not me. I did not write this paragraph. So you can put her. It's not me.

INT: But you submitted this. So how do you think of it?

Anna: At that time, I don't have time to think about it.

INT: But for your PhD you decided to include.

Anna: Yes, I did something similar.

INT: Mhm.

Anna: Actually, I don't agree with this. ((laughing)). This is something exactly different. She speaks about teaching. (...is only the art of awakening...). What I am trying to say here is that in all my life, from the first paragraph which is my introduction I try to say that for my whole life, I try to learn and learn. I have never felt satisfied with my knowledge.

INT: I see. So it's somehow shows your personality.

Anna: Yes.

INT: So, the personality is something you value in your Personal Statement. I can see that. So, when you wrote your PhD proposal, you just based on, in terms of Personal Statement, you are based on this, and maybe your friends' Personal Statements and information on the website.

Anna: I did not find information on the website. Maybe I saw the information on the website and then I...yes before start, because this Statement already contains all the important information so I just decided to try, modify this and make it more me.

INT: So, did you find your professors or supervisors to help you write your Personal Statement?

Anna: No, actually, after writing my Personal Statement and my research proposal, I asked a friend of mine to see if I have any mistakes in language but just this. Nobody else helped me to write my Personal Statement or Research Proposal. And I did not discuss this with any of the professors here. You are not allowed to do it.

INT: So, you just said to your supervisors you want to follow him and you will send him a proposal?

Anna: Yes, I actually asked him if he thinks that I could have a place in the Mphi because I am young. I don't have many teaching experiences. I just want to, from him to say "Yes, you can apply. You have some good...you may can have a place." Or just say me "no, don't try to do it." He did not say anything else.

INT: I see.

Anna: Just I asked him If he believe that I have the ability to do...

INT: ...ability to continue your study...and then he said yes?

Anna: No ((laughing)). He did not say yes; he did not say no. He just said that...

INT: you may try ((laughing)).

Anna: Something like that. It was fun! He did not say yes. He asked me the subject. I mean what the research would be and what I am interested. And I told him something similar with my dissertation but we did not discuss anything else.

INT: So you just submitted to him and then he took a look and in the later stage he said yes.

Anna: Yes.

INT: So what you just mentioned is at the early stage when you are thinking to continue your study?

Anna: Yes.

INT: Ok, so what types of the feedback your friend gave you?

Anne: Just about my language. Because it was my first year in England and it was my first year in trying to write English, academic English. So, I asked her to actually correct it and see whether the sentences make sense. That's it. We were together in front of the computer. She was saying this sentence was good but this is not very good. Let's change a little bit.

INT: So apart from the language issue, are there any other aspects like structure...

Anna: No, just language.

INT: ...whether it makes sense or not.

Anna: Yes.

INT: So how long did it take?

Anna: About 15 minutes. For the Personal Statement, it's about 15 minutes; for the Research Proposal, more than that. For the research proposal, because I used much more complicated language.

INT: Do you need to pay?

Anna: No.

INT: So it's your friend?

Anna: Yeah, friend.

INT: Native English speaker?

Anne: No, not a native English speaker. She was a student in law. And she did her BA in Ken and she came last year in London to do her Master in UCL. So she already has 4 years of English teaching and using English language in order to write her essays. She is good. She was not a native English speaker.

INT: So when you wrote your Personal Statement, do you have clear ideas about what is required for the university application? The requirements...

Anna: Yes, since they accepted me by using this, I guess it's this.

INT: And the proposal?

Anna: For the research proposal, I don't have any chance to read any other proposals from other students. For the proposal, I just used the guidelines. I was not feeling very good to find someone and ask him to give me his proposal. The proposal is very personal. You cannot ask someone else to give you his proposal. I also tried to find something in Google but I did not find something interesting in order to starting points, in order to write my research proposal. So I just used the guidelines, these guidelines the website gave us.

INT: I want to ask you something about the difficulties in the process of writing. So what difficulties did you encounter when you wrote the Personal Statement?

Anna: The Personal Statement?

INT: Yes.

Anna: Ehm...what do you mean by this?

INT: For instance, when you started to write, you may not have the clear idea about what should be included and how to start...

Anna: I will tell you I have an idea what should be included. It was not very difficult to write a Personal Statement. But it was really difficult to write a research proposal for me because I don't have idea of how to do it. But it was not difficult to write a Personal Statement because I already had one Personal Statement. MA one.

INT: Can I ask you something about your Personal Statement? I am curious about like the academic performance is very important in your country? I am interested in that you highlighted the excellent achievements of your academic performance and then you said it's highly competitive to the college gain a place. So I am thinking the academic performance is highly value in your country...

Anna: Yes, it is. Actually, the University of *** at that time is the only university in Cyprus; all the others are colleges. We have lots of teachers who do their BA in the college. They used to do it. Now these universities are private universities in Cyprus. Ok, at that time, the University of *** was the only university in Cyprus. And I want to highlight that I am not coming from the college in my country. I am coming from the University of ***. And It was really hard for me to gain the place in the University of ***. The school of education...let's say...because only the very very good students can get into. Lots of people want to become

the teachers in Cyprus because it is a good pay job. So I just tried to emphasise here that I was a very good student in school. I am an excellent student in school. And I tried very hard to gain a place in the University of *** which is highly privileged in Cyprus. And I also tried to say here. I mentioned my mother that I chose to be a teacher not because of the good pay job in Cyprus, but also I was influenced by my mother and because I love children. I cannot remember what I wrote...

INT: You are excellent. Top universities. I mean in Taiwan as well. It's very difficult to get the access to the top universities. It's very competitive. We have so many students but very few elite universities in Taiwan. So very competitive...

Anna: It's actually the same. We felt a little but uncomfortable when we tried so hard to get into the University of *** and tried so hard to take the BA. Whereas some other students who are not excellent students in school went to the college of Cyprus and then became the teachers more easily...maybe that's why I emphasised so much the excellent in my school years, the University of ***, the highly competitive university entrance exam.

INT: You are hard-working. When I read this, I said Wow...

Anna: This is what I am trying to do to make them say "wow."

INT: To impress your...

Anna: Yes, it's not easy to take a place to become a teacher.

INT: And then you put the appendixes.

Anna: Yeah, I can send you my appendixes.

INT: Really? If it's not confidential...

Anna: No, it's not. This is my degree, the results of my subjects in school. I will send you. No problem.

INT: I notice you are so young but you have teaching experiences. You are the teacher in Cyprus?

Anna: Yes, I actually, in Cyprus in order to take the BA, you have to spend three months into school and work as a teacher of the classroom. In Cyprus, primary school teachers have their own classrooms, and the teachers almost know all the subjects so we were allocated into the state schools, primary state school. And we have to teach all the subjects for these classrooms. The teacher in the classrooms, we have to be the teacher in these three months. This is my only teaching experience.

INT: That's fantastic!

Anna: I tried to emphasise...highlight this experience because in England, they do the PGCE in order to be able to teach in the primary school.

INT: PGCE? What is that?

Anna: I think in England, they do their BA and they have to do other courses in order to be able to teach in the schools. I think it is called PGCE I think. But we do that during our BA study which is 4 years not 3. I highlighted that fact that I have some teaching experiences.

INT: I highlighted this word "magical world" I am curious about this. It's very babbly for me.

Anna: Yes, for me as well. How can I say...

INT: Take your time

Anna: Let me think. My mother is a primary teacher. I have her as a model. I feel like since my mother is a primary teacher. Primary school education is part of my life. I mean...I know everything about how she organises her lesson, how the relationship with her students when they behave bad, relationships with her and other teachers in the school. All these things were part of my mother's life. It's also part of my life. She has the disadvantage to say bring up all the problems from her work at home. We always discuss about everything with her from a very young age. So, I don't know if I explained well...

INT: I think I can somehow understand what you meant. To the "magical world" of education because your mother is a primary school teacher. So you are influenced by these things around you. You see how the things going on, the problem...for you, it's quite amazing. How things going on. You are brought to this world. You are socialised in this situation. Something like that.

Anna: Yes, exactly and that's my dream from a very very young age to become a teacher. I am motivated...I remember myself imitating my mother. I asked my cousins to be my students and I was imitating my mother.

INT: Interesting!

Anna: I also had other teachers in my primary school. For my whole 6 years, she was the teacher in my school. Because my teacher will behave differently with me because I am the head teacher in that school because I am her daughter.

INT: did you see your mum often?

Anna: Yeah, I also spent lots of time with other teachers of that school. I was a daughter of the teacher. I was a new...

INT: You are part of them...

Anna: Part of the student life but also part of the community of teaching in that school...

INT: Excellent! When I read this part, I found this part seems different from other parts, so is this your preference? Want to show your personality...

Anna: This is part of my Personal Statement. Show my personality. But I tried to say beyond the education, beyond the studying, modules and courses I also did other activities. This is important for me as a person.

INT: Previously, I thought there were some of the guidelines or bullets points which you need to include like your academic performance, your extra activities. But apparently it's not. It's your preference.

Anna: Yes, it's my preference. Because I actually I did the application for the Mphi/PhD using the internet. They have the website. You have to attach your proposal and your Personal Statement very big for the box. I did not put in the Box. I attached it. Because actually if I erased this part, this part which can show my personality. I think I could put into the box but I chose to try to show my character.

INT: You value this?

Anna: Yes, this is very valuable.

INT: Because I collected other people's personal statements as well, I found you are the most interesting one. You included lots of the details to show your other aspects. They have only two sentences. As you said, there is the box online. But for research proposal, you have to attach online because it's much longer. But for the Personal Statement, they don't really write it. They just typed something.

Anna: Yes, I chose not to put into then box. I did not know that was bad for the final decision in order to show my personality. This is the final paragraphs. I chose this in order to finish my...I chose it it's not because it's not valuable. It is actually opposite. I found it is very valuable because it shows my personality.

INT: So the last paragraph just shows how great is your institution and...

Anna: This is not a lot about me but lots of students use this...to praise admissions tutors. This is what I chose to end up my Personal Statement with this paragraph. This is something I put later because lots of students use this.

INT: Thank you!

UK academic participant – Steven's interview transcript

*(Notes: The mark of '***' in this text is the information protected by the researcher.)*

Steven: Right, I read your information sheet this morning on the train and I looked at the three texts you gave me and I've also written comments on the texts, the kind of comments that I would think to myself if I was looking at these as part of an application process. Yeah...

INT: Yeah, so basically I don't have any criteria for what elements you should look for...

Steven: Okay, because in the information sheet it says you want to ask specific questions...

INT: About the perceptions of the documents...

Steven: Yeah.

INT: Yeah, can we discuss this in the second section?

Steven: Yeah, sure.

INT: I mean in the first section I would like to ask some questions in a more general sense about how your perceptions about the admissions documents in general and then we will move to much more specific elements which are like personal statements and research proposals and this is the last.

Steven: Right.

INT: Is it okay?

Steven: Yeah, sure.

INT: I have a question about the general admission process. Could you briefly describe how the application documents proceed in our department?

Steven: Well, it's quite confusing at this moment because we've recently moved to a new more centralised system. I don't how many people you've spoken to so far or whether people have mentioned this or not.

INT: Meg... and um, let me think, Meg and Roxy.

Steven: Okay, yeah.

INT: Yeah, and then they said this, kind of the students apply to *** and then the people from like the *** administrative office and then...

Steven: Yes, the applications used to be dealt with within in each department, yeah.

INT: Yeah...

Steven: And now they are processed centrally, which is a little bit awkward and time-consuming and sometimes I think there are delays. For example, I am interviewing a PhD candidate, potential PhD candidate next Tuesday, and this is an application that I first looked at about probably a month ago.

INT: Okay.

Steven: Yeah. I looked at the application. Somebody else... I wanted someone else to look at the application. We both read the research proposal and personal statement. Then I have to email someone in the central department... in order to say that we looked at the application and we would like offer an interview.

INT: Okay.

Steven: And I heard nothing for two weeks and this morning I got an email saying the person who is responsible is on holiday.

INT: Oh...

Steven: So it's quite a delay. Two weeks or three weeks or even more...

INT: Hmmm...

Steven: ...is quite common at this moment. I don't know if that's just because we are getting used to the system or because the system is inherently flawed. I don't know.

INT: Hmmm...

Steven: Yeah.

INT: Yeah.

Steven: Part of the problem is people apply to the college centrally then the people in the central department, the central administration department need to identify the relevant

academics who should be looking at the proposals or the relevant admissions tutors who should be looking at proposals and stuff. And I don't think they necessarily know who they are supposed to communicate with ((laughing)). So there's probably quite a delay sometimes....you know...

INT: Hmmm, I see.

Steven: Hmmm...it's different on the taught Masters programme and research students. With the taught Masters programme an application form including personal statements, CV, references everything goes to a portal...an online portal...

INT: Okay. Hmmm.

Steven: ...that we then access. We have to look at the application online and then make a recommendation on whether to accept... to give an unconditional offer or reject or offer an interview.

INT: Hmmm... you mean for the Master?

Steven: For the taught Masters programme.

INT: Oh, taught master.

Steven: Yeah, are you only interested in research students?

INT: Hmmm, the PhDs.

Steven: Just the PhD application then?

INT: Yeah, but somehow I know the nature of the PhD application and the Master application is quite different.

Steven: Yeah, it's quite different yeah... I mean sometimes though... I mean a lot of the time students will apply for an MPhil/PhD here after already contacting me so I get quite a lot of emails from people who have read one of my articles or who have seen me talk at a conference or have simply looked at the *** web pages and found out what research interests people have. Sometimes I get people emailing me and asking me for help with the written proposal.

INT: Proposal.

Steven: For advice.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Yeah...

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: ...and I often give people advice.

INT: Okay.

Steven: And so in the application form there's space for you to put people you know...

INT: Yeah, what professors you have contacted.

Steven: So have you contacted any academics in the college?

INT: So I think maybe the central department they look for that information and just forward the application...to the...

Steven: So that probably works quicker than... the system probably works better when people have contacted us directly...

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: ...before simply applying.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: I mean it's frustrating because sometimes people apply and they write a research proposal and you think, that's not very good at all. If they'd contacted us before and asked for some advice... So the people that write good proposals have asked for the advice.

INT: Yeah, interesting...makes sense. Hmmm...so when you receive the application documents, do you have a preferred order to... like what section do you read first?

Steven: Personally, I start with the research proposal. Yeah...

INT: Okay.

Steven: ...because I want know that... First of all I want to know that this is worth me looking at because it doesn't matter how strong the application is... could be from a brilliant applicant but if the research proposal is not related to my interests or expertise, then I need to

pass it on to somebody else. So I might... I sometimes get given applications and think oh no, this is interesting but I can't supervise this. I recommend somebody else read it.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So I always start with the research proposal. First of all, to determine that whether it's relevant for me to carry on looking at the application but also to determine – because this is key – to determine to what extent this person has an understanding of what's required at that level of study.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: That obviously every research proposal needs to go through quite an involved process of evolution, yeah? But you want to, when you look at the research proposal, you need to see that this person has an understanding of the field, has done relevant reading...

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: ...has identified an issue or an area that needs to be explored and has some understanding of what research has been done previously and how they might go about collecting and analysing data. Yeah?

INT: Yeah.

Steven: So, I always start with that. I don't tend to take... pay very much attention to a personal statement because it doesn't tell you very much...

INT: (Laughing) Hmmm...

Steven: Because people are clearly... What's very common in personal statements is people saying how wonderful they think *** College is and how much of a privilege it would be to study here...

INT: Yeah (laughing) there's always that paragraph. Always...

Steven: ...which is (laughing) it doesn't tell me anything at all

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Okay? Hmmm...

INT: But I mean in the personal statement, they have some, like their past experiences...

Steven: Yeah, yeah, I mean I always read it but sometimes it doesn't have very much bearing on whether or not I am going to interview somebody.

INT: I see... hmmm.

Steven: I look... I read it but I don't pay as much attention to that as I do to the research proposal...

INT: Hmmm hmm.

Steven: ...or as I do to the application form.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So what degrees they studied in the past, what references are like: that's much more important than the personal statement for me.

INT: More important than a personal statement?

Steven: Yeah, yeah, I pay more attention to that.

INT: So um... like in an applicant's application documents, you think the research proposal is the key, the most important...

Steven: Yeah yeah...

INT: The documents, okay.

Steven: ...for me, definitely.

INT: Okay, so what do you think are the most like credentials or like elements for the potential MPhil/PhD student to gain a place at ***?

Steven: Okay, here I probably need to talk about the interview. So the kind of questions that we are ask in an interview. We usually start by getting the candidate to tell us their reasons why they want to study a PhD. Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: And I'm looking for someone who knows what they're letting themselves in for...(laughing)

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: ...because it requires a huge amount of, hmmm...as you know, commitment...

INT: That's true.

Steven: ...sustained effort, and belief in the subject, real motivation and investment in the subject, not just because they want a qualification...it's not a qualification as such. I see it as something very, very different from most of the other academic qualifications that people study for. It's not something that you just study and pass. You know...

INT: Hmmm, that's true.

Steven: ...it becomes your life for a few years as you know again probably... (laughing)

INT: (Laughing)

Steven: So I'm looking for someone who has real commitment in this field, in this topic, in this subject, and can demonstrate that this is... that they've thought about why they want to carry out this research.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Yeah? That there's an issue that they really believe is important and that they demonstrate that this is something that's researchable. It's feasible to carry out, to collect data and carry out an empirical study, yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: And that they've got some... it might not be very clear or focused but they've got some sense of where this research might lead us, yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: What it might tell us. So it's not about collecting some data; it's about collecting some data that can convey important messages about something that might, for example, have an impact on professional practice, if it's in education.

INT: Yeah, hmmm...interesting. So when you, could you briefly describe your evaluation process of research proposal, like which sections will you read first... or you read from to page to page from the...

Steven: I read it through once from front to back. Yeah? Then I will look very carefully at the references and I want to see an extensive range of relevant references but an up to date range of relevant references. Yeah?

INT: I see.

Steven: And I want to see... I want to see some indication that this person has generally a good understanding of the field, that they've identified research questions that can be answered and that there's some connection between the research methods and the research questions, that they've thought about how they might go about answering these questions by collecting some data. So it's read through it once, look at the bibliography, then look very closely at the research questions and the methods. That's what I do, yeah.

INT: Hmmm. Thank you. So do you follow any standard criteria like that *** gives you, like the criteria sheet when you evaluate the students' research proposals or the whole documents? Did you follow any standard?

Steven: No, not really. Not particularly. No, no. I mean when I first started supervising PhDs... what I did was to look at, make sure I looked at the guidelines for writing research proposals that the college provides on the website...

INT: Okay.

Steven: And so I sort of set my own criteria by looking at that and then trying to determine whether or not a proposal met the kind of criteria set out in the guidelines.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Um... and then it's simply, I think, applying my experiences of doing PhD research and reading research...

INT: So, you didn't really use...?

Steven: Not particularly. Although in the interview there is a form that we are given during the interview.

INT: Okay, okay.

Steven: I don't know where it is.

INT: Do you have the form?

Steven: I can find it for you ((laughing)). I might have to find it and then email to you.

INT: Thank you!

Steven: But there is a form that... it simply asks us questions. It's sort of a framework for guiding questions during an interview and it asks... some of the items in this include for example: previous research methods, whether students have studied research methods before. If they've done a Masters level degree, did they do empirical study for that? Okay?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So there are... there is a sort of framework of suggested questions and there is a form that we have to fill out...

INT: Okay.

Steven: ...for the recommendation. Yeah?

INT: Hmmm...I see.

Steven: I can dig that out for you.

INT: Yeah, that would be really helpful because I am also interested in like institutional practice.

Steven: Yeah...

INT: I am thinking the tension between... I mean the real practice and then the structure that institutions impose to the admissions tutors...

Steven: Yeah, you see again I think this is slightly confusing at ***. I think it's not working very well. Institutionally, I don't think we have a good sense of what are the institutional expectations and requirements and guidelines are, especially since it's all been centralised and we don't have face to face contact. There are people who I email now to arrange an interview who I've never met before. I don't know who they are. They are based in the Strand somewhere.

INT: ((laughing))

Steven: (Laughing) And I've never met them. You know...

INT: (Laughing) Yeah.

Steven: And that... for me I find it difficult to work in that kind of environment. I want to know that there's someone in a room downstairs who knows me and who knows what I look like... and that I know them and we can have some kind of face-to-face communication.

INT: Yeah.

Steven: Which is how it used to be here...

INT: Hmmm...but not anymore.

Steven: ...but not anymore.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Yeah.

INT: Yeah, it's very confusing.

Steven: Yeah, I think it creates lots of confusions.

INT: Yeah, and then like the application form... there is one section called personal statement in the *** website. I checked the *** website in our department – Educational and Professional Studies and there are some instruction saying: ask the applicants to write the personal statement but the instructions for that personal statement is research proposal.

Steven: Yeah.

INT: So they basically use the research proposal criteria under the title of personal statement.

Steven: Right.

INT: So even the title, for me, it's a bit confusing as well. Yeah...the name for those documents.

Steven: Yeah, exactly, exactly. I just had a thought: I can speak to Nick Andon about this. We are interviewing a potential MPhil/PhD student next Tuesday at 12 o'clock. Hmmm... she is Taiwanese...hmmm and it's going to be a telephone interview.

INT: Okay.

Steven: I wonder if you could come along.

INT: Yeah, it would be good. Yeah! Excellent!

Steven: I don't know, in terms of ethical approval... um, I mean you haven't got ethical approval to do that, have you?

INT: Hmmm... I have...

Steven: Does it fit in to your ethical approval?

INT: I have that section because I mentioned... I will contact the admission tutors whether I can observe or listen to some of the informal... hmmm... That one is the kind of informal chat among the admissions tutors... is like maybe you and other colleagues' informal chat about the students...

Steven: Okay, so... I mean what you could do is record... it's going to be a telephone conversation.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: I mean you could you could record the conversation Nick and I have with the applicant...

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: And record the discussion that we have afterwards.

INT: Okay.

Steven: But I have to speak to Nick first and ask his permission.

INT: Okay. ((laughing))

Steven: It's Tuesday. Next Tuesday at 12.

INT: When?

Steven: 12 o'clock.

INT: 2 o'clock.

Steven: 12 o'clock

INT: Oh, 12.

Steven: Okay, 12pm in here, next Tuesday, 6th of July.

INT: In your room?

Steven: But let me speak to Nick first.

INT: Okay sure. And then if Nick said it's fine, you can email me.

Steven: Yeah.

INT: Thank you so much! Because I am trying to like to observe some... I know the interview is one part of the important...

Steven: Yeah, it's important. It's important.

INT: Yeah. She is a Taiwanese.

Steven: Yeah. That reminds me I have got to speak to Nick anyway.

INT: Thank you. Thank you so much! So, um... in terms of like the personal statement or research proposal, are there any word limits? Like the word limitation for both documents.

Steven: Yeah, research proposal... I mean the college guidelines stipulate that the research proposal should be a maximum 1,500 words.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Hmmm, personal statement I don't remember. I don't know. I imagine that it's 600, 500 words, something like that. I can't remember seeing it though, but I know the research proposal has a word limit.

INT: Hmmm, but I mean I never know this word limit so I just wrote as much as want.

Steven: Not many people do. Yeah... (laughing)

INT: Yeah, but my supervisors didn't (laughing)... didn't really pick up...

Steven: That's... that's part... there's often quite a significant difference between institutional practice and then individual professional practice.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So, the institution might say maximum 1,500 words but on the whole, most supervisors probably don't... are not interested that much in the word account.

INT: Hmmm, yeah.

Steven: You know.

INT: So they just like put something on there. Just says the word limit in general...

Steven: Yeah, yeah...

INT: Okay. So in the process of evaluation, hmmm, like as you've mentioned you will discuss with other colleagues like Nick or other people?

Steven: Yeah, so whoever I am going to interview... So basically, um, I will identify... or I might have been identified by someone else who has looked at the application form before me.

INT: Hmmm hmm... okay.

Steven: Hmmm... we say whoever looked at the form first, if they see that, yes, this form is within my field of expertise then I need to find a potential second supervisor. And all of the interviews conducted by two academics. Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: And in my case, it tends to be if it's anything related to language teaching and teacher education then I will interview with ***. If it's anything related to language, world English use and identity and sociolinguistics then I'll interview with ***.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: But I've also done a couple of interviews with, for example, *** in ICT, with hmmm... *** who is more I think Sociology or Sociology in Education perhaps.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Not quite sure she does.

INT: ***.

Steven: ***.

INT: Sociology.

Steven: Yeah.

INT: Yeah.

Steven: So I did an interview once with her.

INT: Hmmm. Yeah.

Steven: And once with ***.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Because very often that there will be a PhD that straddles two quite different disciplines and then... in which case you need people from very different backgrounds.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Yeah, I supervise *** you know ***.

INT: ***, yeah. I know.

Steven: With *** in the *** department. We've got really different backgrounds. ((laughing))

INT: Hmmm. ((laughing)) So like, I think you already mentioned. Like in the application documents, there will be the student's academic marks.

Steven: Yeah.

INT: The official report.

Steven: Yeah.

INT: The academic performance.

Steven: Yeah, that's quite important for me.

INT: So what do you think that criteria... that...

Steven: Well, I think it's very important because studying for PhD is academically very demanding.

INT: Hmmm hmm.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Hmmm hmm.

Steven: And I think there's a huge, it's a huge leap-up from Master's level to PhD level.

INT: Yeah, hmmm.

Steven: And that that can be quite a challenge and it comes as a shock to a lot of people especially as the college continues to tighten the requirements.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So now the students enrolling for MPhil/PhD have to have upgraded, if they are full-time, within one year...

INT: Yeah.

Steven: ...single academic year.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: If you've not got a very strong academic record, it's going to be really, really difficult to cope.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So I am looking for people who've got...hmmm...very good grades in their Bachelor's and Master's degrees and supporting references.

INT: Supporting references.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Hmmm. So how do you weigh different documents, hmmm...like research proposal, academic performance and references?

Steven: I don't know if I can articulate that...

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: ...because it's a very impressionistic judgement.

INT: Hmmm. So...

Steven: So I wouldn't be able to say... I couldn't give percentage figures to show you the weighting of each aspect of an applicant's...hmmm...sort of overall background. I just look at their proposal, their background and everything together and then give an impressionistic judgement.

INT: Okay, let me give you a much more extreme scenario.

Steven: Hmmm.

INT: If the student's research proposal is fantastic, the idea is really good and then basically the proposal is fine but with...not really good academic performance.

Steven: Right, yeah...

INT: Hmmm, so what will you...?

Steven: Okay, I mean that does happen. That happened last year to somebody who applied here... who in the end went to another university because we had concerns but I knew someone in another university that would happily take this person on the strength of her proposal and my reference. She is a student who studied her MA with us here.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: And her average, her final score was about 58% and she in her assignments often got mid 50s when we're expecting high 60s and 70s for people doing PhD.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: But she has a very, very good proposal and she'd spent a long time working on that proposal and had a really good understanding of the field and how it related to her own teaching context. So I recommended that she goes to somewhere else because I know the colleagues here would have had doubts. And I think here because the system is... because there's less flexibility here than there is in other institutions in terms of meeting the requirements and progressing from one year to the next, it would be very difficult for that student and I think she's doing really well where she is but maybe wouldn't have done really well with the pressure of having to upgrade within a year.

INT: Okay.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Yeah, it's because there is other hmmm...like the gate-keeping stuffs...

Steven: Yeah.

INT: Like the hmmm...two, twice a year the annual individual progress form and then the upgrade within 12 years.

Steven: Exactly, yeah, yeah, it's really strict.

INT: Okay.

Steven: Um, I mean someone not having a good academic record, I wouldn't automatically exclude them. So if I read an application, I saw a really strong research proposal that was

very, very worth pursuing, then I would still offer them an interview even if they didn't have necessarily particularly high grades.

INT: Hmmm. I see.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Yeah. So it's not exclusive. It's just different considerations and your impression on...

Steven: Yeah, I mean each one I take very... I look at each application very, very individually, okay?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: And I mean if... that might be a time where I look at the personal statement more carefully, if the academic record isn't good, because I might give some indications of why their academic record isn't that good. Because I mean grades and exams and grades in university degree programmes aren't necessarily a good reflection of a student's academic abilities. (Laughing) Yeah?

INT: Yeah, can reveal, reveal the, can signal the students' academic abilities by some...

Steven: Yeah, by looking at the personal statement but also by speaking to them.

INT: Hmmm.

Seven: You know, by interviewing them and then finding out...

INT: That's true.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Seeing how they respond to questions.

INT: Hmmm, interesting. Okay, so I think we can move to this...

Steven: Right, section two. This is where we look at the personal statements.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So what do you want me to say? I guess these two go together, don't they? Is that the personal statement of that proposal and then this is the other personal statement.

INT: Yes.

Steven: You see, this personal statement is a good example of why I think personal statements are not particularly useful, you know.

INT: ((laughing))

Steven: "I cannot find any better way to start this statement than with a quotation by Socrates." Now as soon as... if someone mentions 'Socrates' in the first... in the opening of their personal statement, I think they are simply trying to impress. Yeah?

INT: Hmmm. ((laughing))

Steven: ...which raises suspicions. If I think someone's simply quoting names, yeah, that people see as intellectual names, then I might think, well, what they are trying to mask here? They're trying to impress with this kind of citation by masking the lack of substance in their writing. Yeah? So that puts me off for a start.

INT: The first impression. ((laughing))

Steven: Yeah, yeah...this one in particular. It keeps referring to Appendices. Appendix 1, appendix 2, appendix 3, appendix 4.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: I found my... If I'm looking at applications, I want to be able to see everything I can in front of me.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: If I am looking at a personal statement, I don't want to have to look at an appendix; I want the person to tell me here very explicitly the point they are trying to make. Yeah?

INT: Yeah.

Steven: So it's not... I mean there is quite a lot of mention of background. There's a good section here where this person talks about previous studies at the University of ***, working on research projects for example, having conducted a quantitative investigation. So that's interesting because I think, right this person has experience of research so that would be

something I would highlight because I could ask them to tell me more about this in an interview.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Yeah.

Steven: So that's more important than telling me that they've read Socrates. Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Hmmm... then you've got this reference to appendix...

INT: Hmmm... another appendix...

Steven: Another appendix, yeah. Here the person is telling me something potentially very interesting: "During this period, I faced challenges, responsibilities, complexities and possibilities." This is their teaching experience, working in Greek Cypriot primary schools...

INT: Yeah.

Steven: ...where the person in question was observing and teaching lessons as an assistant teacher. Right... so it's what are the "challenges, responsibilities, complexities and possibilities arising in multilingual classroom," but that person doesn't tell me anything about these complexities, responsibilities, possibilities, so that again would be something to follow up in an interview.

INT: Okay.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Hmmm yeah.

Steven: If a personal statement is going to be useful, it needs to tell you this kind of background information but it needs to tell you why that background information is relevant and important.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: What about... I mean this for me raises questions. So this person is aware that a multilingual/multicultural classroom can bring with it certain difficult challenges and complexities but what are these? There is no indication here of what they are. All right?

INT: Hmmm hmm.

Steven: There this good section here as well, but I would start, I think... I want people in a personal statement to be quite bold at the beginning and tell me who are... I don't know who this person is... "I cannot find any better way to start this statement." But who are you? Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So I need an introduction to the person. "Currently I am a student at *** doing the MA in Language, Ethnicity and Education." Oh, all right, okay, that's interesting. "Through the readings of the various classes I have attended so far..." So that kind of statement, telling me who you are, positioning the person I'm reading about is really helpful (laughing)... for I think a lot of admission...

INT: Maybe this student can put this in the front...right in the beginning...

Steven: Yeah, yeah... Again you've got important stuff but it lacks detail. "What is worth mentioning..." Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: She says, he says, "What is worth mentioning, is that since I believe that education cannot be achieved only through books, I was involved in a number of extra activities. These activities have added colour and meaning in my life." What activities? "Reading Greek and international literature was very beneficial... broadened my mind..." But doesn't give very much details. Yeah?

INT: Yeah.

Steven: Okay. And then you've got this statement at the end.

INT: ((laughing))

Steven: "I am very looking forward to the prospect of doing a research degree at ***, a university renowned for the..." We don't need to be told that we are a university renowned for the excellence of its teaching. Yeah?

INT: (Laughing)...

Steven: I know that if this person has applied to other institutions, he or she or whatever has said exactly the same, changing *** for Institute of Education or whatever.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So that for me has just... it puts me off.

INT: ((laughing))

Steven: But the research proposal that goes with that is really good. Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: It's quite typical. It's very thoroughly thought out. You got... you got... have really given a lot of, um, thought to the research questions although some of it is confusing, it's not very focused. I mean number two contains about four different questions and it's not... it needs to step back more and be more analytical. So what do all of these different discrete questions lead to? Yeah?

INT: Hmmm. Yeah...

Steven: For me, number two is not on the same level as number one and number three.

INT: Hmmm. Yeah, this is comparatively a very big chunk here.

Steven: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So if I were giving advice to someone, then keep the questions really straightforward and simple, then if you want to elaborate on them afterwards you talk about what might be involved to answer that question. Yeah?

INT: Hmmm, yeah...

Steven: So this is not a research question: "Does the implementation of theories, principles and practices in the field of second/additional language education assist GSL students to learn Greek, develop literacy and achieve academically?" Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: "Specifically, will GSL students be facilitated..." It's too much. So a research question will be, um, more along the lines of, um, in what ways are theories and principles being put into... currently being put into practice? To what extent can these be judged to be effective?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Something like that, you know.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: We got involved in some small details without seeing the big picture there.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Some of the... here some of the... in terms of the methods there's one that doesn't quite fit.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Because I don't understand what this proposed unit is about or how it fits in with the research questions.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Good section at the end. References is quite good. You've got some important names in bilingualism such as Baker. Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: You got some knowledge of research methods because it's someone who is doing a MA here anyway. You got members of departments. ((laughing))

INT: ((laughing))

Steven: So you'd expect that. Yeah?

INT: ((laughing)) Hmmm.

Steven: So it looks relatively extensive and up to date.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: All right? However, the research proposal could say more about how specific... how the work of specific scholars has influenced the approach in the thinking that hasn't taken place in the proposal, yeah? So identifying more clearly what the theoretical and

methodological frameworks are that are going to be applied. So there's a good bit of linkage but not... it's not... it's not linked very, very...

INT: Tight?

Steven: Clear... yes exactly, exactly, not very tightly with the research proposal. But it's quite a good proposal, a strong one.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: And this other research... sorry personal statement... which is not particularly well-written in places. It lacks cohesion. It's difficult to read.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Um, it's someone who needs a little bit support with the academic writing, I think.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: There are long sentences. They are trying to conflate too much. So someone who did the BA in ***. But this first sentence, "The BA in *** I completed last year at *** College has not only enhanced this but has also drawn my attention to the interesting developments that surround the English language..." I'm out of breath now. I need to stop but it carries on... "which are the results of its increasing global usage and the symbolic capital and power it signifies nowadays." That needs to be two sentences. And there are couple of occasions where this happens.

INT: Hmmm. I see.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Yeah.

Steven: There's... similarly not very much detail given. This should come sooner. This is what the person is doing at the moment, prior to applying, an MSc in Social Anthropology. Yeah?

INT: Yeah.

Steven: But that should be mentioned much earlier on... similar to the other one. "I have taken the MSc in Social Anthropology," um... and it mentions names, "Foucault", "Bourdieu" but it's a list of names. Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So (laughing) it's like I know these names. They are important names. I know about "Foucault", "Bourdieu", "Sassure", spelled wrong.

INT: Spell wrongly.

Steven: Yeah, yeah, but what do you know about them? What are they relevant? Why did they...? Why have...? Why you are interested in them? What is it that "Foucault" said or "Bourdieu" said that makes you interested in this topic?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Yeah?

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: So it's a fairly weak personal statement in my view but it might a harsh judgement, you know.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: Um, but it's strange that they don't start with what they're doing currently... MSc Social Anthropology... start with that.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: I'd be interested to see what their research proposal was like....

INT: Thank you so much.

Steven: ...because obviously that's what I pay more attention to. You're very welcome, very welcome, Tiffany.

INT: Your information is very interesting!

Steven: Oh...

INT: When you respond, I kind of proceed what themes might be coming up from this interview. It's very interesting.

Steven: (Laughing) Yeah, yeah have a look at the interview. I mean you might see in the interviews what questions we ask and how we ask them and how they respond. I mean what I always do in the interview, I put people under pressure. Yeah?

INT: Uh?

Steven: In my view, you have to put people under pressure. You have to challenge people. You have to challenge their assumptions and you have to question their thinking because that's that's a fundamental part of being a PhD student.

INT: Hmmm.

Steven: And a lot of PhD students I think are shocked by that, especially if they haven't been through a UK education system where they're not necessarily that used to questioning, um, current beliefs and assumptions, and what I want to do is get people to re-think all of their assumptions and challenge all of the notions that they take, they might take for granted. And you see it, week in and week out in ***. That's what ***, ***, and *** do. Yeah?

INT: Yeah.

Steven: You talk, these are my research... this is the research I am doing. And you're all very happy about this. And then at the end of each talk, you get picked apart, yeah? And so it's important to see how someone responds, not necessarily that they have the right answer because I wouldn't expect that, but it's to see how they cope with being put under that kind of pressure. Partly that's what I am interested in – as well as their knowledge base, their background, their educational achievement, their interest in the subject, their awareness of the subject. But it's also the way they respond (laughing) to this kind of probing question and pressure.

INT: Hmmm, you mean the interview with the students.

Steven: Yeah, because I think as a research student at ***, you have to be prepared to have all of your work criticised and all of your ideas questioned.

INT: Thank you so much.

Steven: You're welcome Tiffany.

US student participant – Alice's interview transcript

*(Notes: The mark of '***' in this text is the information protected by the researcher.)*

INT: So, um, this interview will be about your views on the application documents in general, and then I will then ask you some questions, much more specific...

Alice: Okay.

INT: ...on the statement of purpose.

Alice: Okay.

INT: And then, er, in the second sections I will, er, have some questions to ask you about your statement of purpose.

Alice: Okay. Okay.

INT: So, um, could you tell me where are you originally from?

Alice: I'm from Canada.

INT: Okay. Could you briefly mention about your educational background for me?

Alice: Oh sure. I went to public high school and I went to, um, the *** in British Columbia, did a degree in Economics.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And then I did a Masters degree at *** in Ottawa, Canada, in Communication. And then I started here in Reading, Writing and Literacy in September.

INT: Okay, thank you. So, um, what language can you speak apart from English?

Alice: I can speak a little bit of French and read French and, um, just a tiny bit of Cantonese.

INT: Okay. ((laughs))

Alice: ((laughs))

INT: So, er, how long have you been so far for your PhD?

Alice: How long?

INT: Er, how long have you been here for your PhD so far? Are you ((0:01:26.8?))

Alice: Oh, I just started. I just started in September.

INT: So your first year.

Alice: First year, yeah.

INT: So far so good? ((laughs))

Alice: Yeah, yeah. ((laughs)) It's busy.

INT: ((laughs)) So, er, I will now ask you some questions about your general perceptions of admission documents in general.

Alice: Okay.

INT: So among, er, the admission documents, which part of the documents do you think the most important in the application?

Alice: Um, well I'd say initially they look at the more standardised documents like the GRE scores, um, and then degree, past degrees and possibly transcripts, and then statement of purpose and letters of recommendation, although that's the initial, and then I think for the second run through, once you've sort of passed the hurdle, they probably look at statements of purpose and letters of recommendation with equal weight.

INT: Hmmm hmm. So, er, what do you think the statement of purpose compare with other relevant, you know, compared with other application documents like the GRE score, transcripts?

Alice: Right. I think it's, um, I think it's important to... at least the introduction of the statement of purpose must be engaging and, um, be relevant to the school to which you're applying, otherwise I think that they won't read any further. So I think it's important but I'm not sure if it would be the first thing they look at.

INT: Okay.

Alice: I think they would look at standardised test scores first.

INT: Okay, I see. So, um, what, what do you think about the letter of recommendation?

Alice: The letter of recommendation?

INT: Yeah.

Alice: Well I think that it... I'm not sure if it's the content is important as much as who it's from.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And they look at who it's from first. So if it's from someone they know then it gets their attention and they pay more attention to it. If it's from a school or a field that they're not familiar with or a non-academic one, I think that that would have less importance.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: It would, it would reinforce their opinion regarding me, so...

INT: Hmmm. So how about the academic transcripts, like undergraduate GPA, MA?

Alice: Um...

INT: You think that that is important?

Alice: No, I don't think it's that important. I think it's important to, um, have not done badly but I think that, if everything else is good they will, um, they will accept that a Bachelors degree is a Bachelors degree is a Bachelors degree. So I, I, I think that, um, I suppose if you had a strong application and a weak transcript...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: ...then it wouldn't be that important, but if you had a really strong transcript and then you had a weak application, it wouldn't help it either.

INT: Er, you mean a statement?

Alice: Statement and references and...

INT: Okay. I understand.

Alice: ...if... I think that, I think that they each have a value to the four components, the GRE, the... the... but if, if one of them is weak, I think that the transcripts would be one of the ones that they would easily say it doesn't matter because they've developed a research topic and they have references that aren't as... they're more, they're more relevant, they're more, they're more direct about the person's abilities than a grade, so...

INT: I see. So how, er, how about the résumé?

Alice: The résumé?

INT: Hmmm. CV.

Alice: I think it's probably... I think each of the elements has a value and a weight...

INT: Yeah.

Alice: ...and I think that, if four of the items... so if we have the GRE scores, the transcripts, the letters of recommendation, the statement of purpose – am I missing...? And the résumé, I think if one of those is weak but the other four are strong, they would be okay. So, so I don't think that the résumé is the first thing they look at but if, if it's a really strong résumé it might pull up something if it's... if everything else is sort of medium high but it's a really good résumé then they might give it a second glance.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: Does that make sense?

INT: Hmmm hmm.

Alice: ((laughs)) So...

INT: So I will now start to ask you more specific questions...

Alice: Okay.

INT: ...about the statement of purpose.

Alice: Okay.

INT: So, er, what do you think are the purpose of, er, the statement of purpose for the ((0:05:54.4?)) study application?

Alice: Um, well, I think it tells you, it tells the reader that the person has a, has a strong interest and a developed idea.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: I think they want people who have, who are coming in with an idea of what they want to do. They don't want somebody who says, "Oh I just really like to study Feminist Literature." They want somebody who'll say, "I want to study, for example, you know, the Role of Feminist Literature on the Influence of ((0:06:23.0?)) 1920, or, sorry, 20th century

criticism of ((Poe's?)) work." So some... they want people who've really thought out a research idea and that's what I think the purpose should show.

INT: I see.

Alice: I didn't say that very well.

INT: ((laughs))

Alice: ((laughs)) I walked around it.

INT: So anything else you see the purpose of this document?

Alice: I think that the purpose also describes whether or not they'd be a good fit.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And if the readers are interested in what's being written even if it's written very well...

INT: Hmmm hmm.

Alice: ...it tells you whether or not the person would fit into the, the school, the philosophy of the school so...

INT: Hmmm. I see. So, er, what content do you think, er, important to include in or to a statement of purpose?

Alice: Well I don't think that your background is very important. I'll do it the opposite way: I think it's important to explain what your research interests are and to explain why it's a good fit for the school that you're applying to.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: Um, and I don't think, you know... I think that's it. I think you should tell them why you're interested in the school and what you think you can contribute to the organisation through your research interest, so...

INT: I see, okay, thank you. So, er, what do you think your potential readers will like to see from reading your statement of purpose?

Alice: Er, the same thing: I think they'd like to know why the school would be a good fit for me.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And, you know, what I can contribute to the field of research.

INT: Hmmm. I see. So, er, before you applied for the applications, do you have any experiences of writing a statement of purpose at all?

Alice: Yes. Yeah. I did one other statement of purpose once.

INT: Er, for your MA?

Alice: Oh, I wrote that one too, didn't I? Yeah, I wrote an MA statement of purpose and then I wrote a P... another application to a different school for a PhD and that feedback gave me the insight that I have now I think.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: The Masters one I had no feedback on. I don't remember it. ((laughs))

INT: Hmmm. What type of feedback? You said, um...

Alice: When I applied to another school I tried to give them a more, um, holistic view of who I am and, you know, why I would be a good fit for the school. And the feedback I got was that they didn't really care about that; they wanted to know what the research was and to have a really good developed research idea and that could really help pull out the value of my application.

INT: Hmmm. I see. So, er, you wrote to them to ask them what did they think about your statement of purpose?

Alice: Right. Well I, I didn't get into the school so I contacted them to find out why I didn't get into the school...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: ...and that was one of the reasons, is they said they, they were looking for people who had a really strong focus...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: ...and really have teased out what they want to do, so...

INT: Hmmm. That was quite helpful.

Alice: Yes, yeah. And they also said to not put personal information in.

INT: Er, not to...?

Alice: Not too much personal information.

INT: Personal information, okay.

Alice: They don't really care, so... ((laughs))

INT: ((laughs)) So, um, before you had, had those experiences of writing statement of purpose...

Alice: Yeah.

INT: ...was there any courses or anyone to teach you like how to write a statement of purpose, the courses?

Alice: No I never took any courses. I had... the first time I did it I had some friends and my mom review it for, you know, editorial content and...

INT: Oh.

Alice: ...but none of them were academics.

INT: Okay.

Alice: And then, when I applied to ***, I had a friend who was finishing her PhD review it for me.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: So she gave me some feedback, and coupled with the other, that from the previous experience, so...

INT: Thank you. So like in the process of writing your statement of purpose what main source, what was the main source to help you?

Alice: Mentors?

INT: Main source, or the sources to help you?

Alice: Main sources, oh.

INT: Or any other sources.

Alice: For my statement of purpose?

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: Well probably, um, so when I didn't get into the other school I started to do my own research...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: ((0:10:35.3?)) so I sat, I sat in on a class and I took, I took a class at another institution, um, and I collected a body of research and collected a field of idea... you know, a collection of ideas that, when I sat down to do the statement of purpose I pulled from that to really develop what I needed. And then I of course took faculty information, I got the *** book of all the faculty...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: ...and read about each faculty member and then, after I shortlisted those, I would go onto their websites and I would see what their publications were like to see if there was a overlap between...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And I also went to see, um, ***, who's the Dean of Graduate... he's the Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies.

INT: Um...

Alice: Here's here. He's a faculty member here, and I just went to him to see if there was a good fit. So I wanted to make sure before I went through the process that there may be an interest for this area. So...

INT: You mean the Dean of the ***?

Alice: Yeah, not the Dean though. He's... I think he's the Assistant Dean of Graduate Studies.

INT: Okay.

Alice: His name's ***.

INT: ***...

Alice: He might be the Dean. Anyway, if you look in the faculty you can see... you can just look online to see who he is. ***. So I went and had a meeting with him. And I also contacted a few professors to get copies of syllabis from classes...

INT: Oh, okay.

Alice: ...to see if those syllabis, you know, were interesting. I didn't want to come here if I wasn't going to be interested in what I did, so... so...

INT: Hmmm. So you contact some of the... contacted some of the faculty...

Alice: Correct.

INT: ...in, er, in the Reading, Writing and Literacy program.

Alice: Correct. Well, and I... well, in the ***, because I knew a few other ones that I spoke to also.

INT: Oh.

Alice: Because one person who's a faculty member gave me a letter of reference.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: But he didn't really give me any guidance on the process. I didn't want to impose myself on him but he did write me a letter of reference so...

INT: So you mentioned that, er, after you get the feedback from one of the school...

Alice: Yeah.

INT: ...and then you like said, um, said in one of the ((0:12:45.1?))

Alice: Yeah.

INT: And that was, er, it's a couple of months later or...?

Alice: No, it was a couple of years. I had my son so...

INT: Okay.

Alice: Er, let's see, in 2006 I... let me see, 2006 I took the course, 2000 and... in 2005 I applied for another PhD program and then in 2... and then I found out I didn't get into it, and so in 2006 I took a course, then I had my son, then I presented a paper, and then in 2008... 2008? Or 2009? I think it was 2... I think it was 2008 I started on a course with a faculty member from here, from ***, not Reading, Writing and Literacy though.

INT: Hmmm. Is this... this one?

Alice: Yes. Yeah.

INT: Yeah, you mentioned like your statement...

Alice: Yeah, right.

INT: ***.

Alice: Yeah, do you know him? He's so nice. He's really a nice, nice professor.

INT: It's another program?

Alice: He's, um, he may be Policy, I'm not sure.

INT: Policy Research?

Alice: Maybe, maybe, I'm not sure.

INT: I see.

Alice: He may be Teaching Practices.

INT: Okay.

Alice: I'm not sure. He's... I haven't figured it out, all the different divisions, so...

INT: Yeah, because there are many...

Alice: Right, right.

INT: ...subdivisions.

Alice: Right, right, and they're all just letters, right? ((laughs))

INT: ((laughs))

Alice: So, okay.

INT: Hmmm. So, er, when in the process of writing...

Alice: Yeah.

INT: ...did you check some of the information on the website, like to see how other people do, um, compose their personal statement?

Alice: Yeah.

INT: You didn't check any...?

Alice: I didn't check anybody's, no.

INT: Okay.

Alice: I didn't look at anybody's. Hmmm.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: Never thought of it. ((laughs))

INT: So... but, um, did you check the university website, like to see what should be included in the...

Alice: The statement of purpose? Of course, yeah, yeah.

INT: Is, is the instruction like this? 'Cause I just, er, printed this out from the university website. I'm just wondering whether this is the one.

Alice: Yes.

INT: Is this the general guideline?

Alice: This, this was the general guideline I followed, yeah.

INT: Okay, hmmm.

Alice: But I didn't... this wasn't applicable.

INT: Hmmm. Yeah.

Alice: Er, none of that was applicable. Just that was what it...

INT: So did you follow the...?

Alice: Yeah, well it had to be 750 words...

INT: Yeah.

Alice: ...and so, then, yeah, I answered why *** was a good fit. Um, and I described my background to some degree but I didn't, I don't think I discussed many personal experiences except that we lived in Bermuda because it led to a professional experience.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: Um, 'cause it says 'related to your program of study' so... Um, yeah, I, I mean I, I tried to make sure I addressed each of those issues as they were relevant but, based on the advice I got from other people, is I also made sure that it had a very clear research focus to it so that they could see I had, I had a goal, I knew what I wanted to do when I got here.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: Of course I don't know when I'll have time to do that ((laughter)) but one day, right?

INT: Hmmm. Yeah. So, er, in the process of writing, I mean in the later stage, did you find, er, anyone or send your piece of writing to someone else to edit?

Alice: Yes. I sent it to my friend who'd done her PhD...

INT: Okay.

Alice: ...at ***. Um, we had already been... I was helping her with her dissertation...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: ...and, you know, we exchanged, you know, we ment... we co-mentor each other I guess. And then the final round I sent it to my mom who's a former English teacher...

INT: Oh.

Alice: ...for her round of, you know, to make sure it was clear and, and punctuated properly and no typos and things that we may have missed, so...

INT: Hmmm. So, er, you mentioned, um, the friend who...

Alice: Yes.

INT: Um, what type of feedback did she give you?

Alice: She gave me, um, she helped me tease out areas that weren't clear...

INT: Okay.

Alice: ...and order of information to be presented.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: Er, she reinforced what was good, um, and she really helped me understand how the school works so that I could, you know, make sure my language fit in with the language of the school 'cause my background is in Education.

INT: Okay.

Alice: Um, and she basically just, you know, supported me through it and, you know, was my 'cheerleader'.

INT: ((laughs))

Alice: So...

INT: That's nice.

Alice: Yeah ((laughs)) yeah, it was. I was very lucky. ((laughs))

INT: Hmmm. ((laughs)) So apart from your mom and your friend's...

Alice: Yeah.

INT: ...um, did you seek any professional help?

Alice: No.

INT: Okay. So, um, in the process of writing, did you encounter any difficulties when you write your...?

Alice: What kind of difficulties do you mean, like just challenges...

INT: Hmmm. Yeah, challenges.

Alice: ...of trying to figure out what to say?

INT: Hmmm hmm. Hmmm.

Alice: I'm sure I did because it took me many months to write it. It was a process that I took, you know... maybe took me two months, because I have two small children so it was ebbing and flowing with what other things needed to be done.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: So the biggest challenge may have been the, the time to be able to just sit and work on it, because I was on like a fundraising committee and I had play dates and housework and kids stuff and schools to get my kids to.

INT: Hmmm hmm.

Alice: So that was probably my biggest obstacle, was just... it was more non-related material. And then, um, and then the rest of it, I would say I just, um, did a lot of iterations of it, you know, starting out with a real free thought analysis stream of consciousness, you know, just write whatever and then I would read all of those and...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: ...figure out where it would fit and... Oh, I guess I also, early in the process, now that we're talking about it, I went to their website and I looked at a description of what the programs were, the different groups, the Reading, Writing, Literacy versus the ECS – 'cause I also looked at ECS which is...

INT: Hmmm. What is ECS?

Alice: ...Education Community... Education, Culture and Society I think.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And, um, that's why I went to see *** because he's in that group...

INT: Okay.

Alice: ...and he directed me to Reading, Writing, Literacy. So I don't know if that counts as professional but he did steer me, he said, "Based on what you've shown me you'd have a better research fit with Reading, Writing, Literacy. Um, so yeah, so I would go through those and I would see, you know, I would do a careful analysis of what each school, what work they were doing, what fields were important, and I'd just do a comparative analysis through the different programs, so...

INT: I see. So, er, could you tell me how you structure, how you composed your statement of purpose, how you start?

Alice: So... okay, so I was mentioning it was a real stream of consciousness, just going through it and deciding what, um, you know, just trying to answer the question, "Why do I want to do this?"

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And then, you know, I would take that and see if there were any themes and I often have a notebook with me so that if an idea comes up I'd just jot it down.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: So I would assemble all of those pieces and then, um, just like any, any assignment you have to do, I knew I needed to write a really tight piece of information in 750 words that had to really have... it had to be exact and precise; it couldn't be kind of wandering.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And so it just was a process of iterations of read it, sleep on it, read it, come back to it, oh thought of something, would this be a better word, and...

INT: Hmmm. I see.

Alice: So organic, I guess it's an organic process.

INT: ((laughs)) Okay, so, er, when you composed your statement of purpose...

Alice: Hmmm.

INT: ...have you ever considered your potential readers? I mean...

Alice: Absolutely.

INT: ...so you, like you write for a particular faculty?

Alice: Right.

INT: Okay.

Alice: Um, I didn't... I was definitely writing to Reading, Writing, Literature faculty...

INT: Hmmm. Hmmm.

Alice: ...but I don't, wouldn't say that I knew any of them well enough...

INT: Okay.

Alice: ...to say that I was writing specifically to one person.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: So... And in fact I think the only person I referred to in it is, um, ***, and then the others are in...

INT: Yeah.

Alice: Oh, and ***, right.

INT: Yeah, okay.

Alice: Oh no, I didn't...

INT: Yeah, you have. ((0:21:44.9?))

Alice: Okay, oh, you took it out, okay.

INT: Yeah, I memorise the information.

Alice: Okay.

INT: Yeah.

Alice: Right. So...

INT: ((0:21:51.0?))

Alice: So Dr *** and then ***...

INT: Doctor...

Alice: ***, yeah, Dr. ***. But I mean she's not in... she's in, she's in the division but she's not in Reading, Writing, Literacy.

INT: Okay, hmmm.

Alice: Um, and in fact since I've gotten in I've realised he's my advisor.

INT: ((laughs))

Alice: But I'm, I'm realising that like ***... her work is fascinating to me.

INT: Okay.

Alice: So, you know, I'm realising that now that I'm in here I only knew just a teeny bit about it...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: ...and would, would maybe have changed my focus a little bit if I were to do it again, now that I've met these people and know them.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: So... Or maybe I would have expanded it. ((laughs))

INT: ((laughs)) Yeah, because normally when you get in you can switch from the topic a little bit.

Alice: Right, right.

INT: Doesn't have to be exactly the same...

Alice: I know.

INT: ...as what you proposed.

Alice: Right, well and I'm even realising like I think I say that I want to work with, um, you know, I want to look at... I don't know where I say it, I want to work at the media lab and...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: ...but I find right now, I mean I'm only four weeks into this so it doesn't really count, but like here there's such a huge focus on Literature that I'm wondering, okay, well how am I going to escape the realms of Literature and move into multimedia?

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: So I'm trying not to be impatient because I realise I'm just at the very beginning of this whole process so...

INT: But you still have time to explore.

Alice: Right, right, so...

INT: So, um, what image do you want to, er, give to your potential readers? Like what message do you want to convey?

Alice: Okay.

INT: To get across to your reader?

Alice: I want them to ((interruption)) The message I was trying to get was that I'm organised, that I'm determined, and that I know what I want to do, and I really just would help them be a better research institution.

INT: Hmmm hmm. Okay, thank you.

Alice: You're welcome.

INT: So I think I've finished the questions here.

Alice: Okay.

INT: So I have some questions about your pers... er, statement of purpose.

Alice: Okay.

INT: Hmmm. Er, could you, er, explain, elaborate more on this for me?

Alice: Okay.

INT: Because I'm not really familiar with...

Alice: Sure. So what this person's saying is that, um, so the area I'm interested in is early childhood television and television and what it does, what the exposure to it is and what the content is, and not just what happens, you know, between now and after, right immediately after, but further down the road.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And this person, this ties into a research paper I did. He's reinforcing it, so right here I'm putting this quote in to show that there's a need for more work to be done in this field and this is a well-known person, um, in, in the field of cognitive and behavioural science. And so I'm, right here, he's saying prospective long-term studies should be undertaken because right now we don't know the uncontrolled experiment is children watch TV every day, all the time...

INT: Hmmm. I see.

Alice: ...and we don't really understand what's being done.

INT: Yeah. That's true.

Alice: And so we need to, um, see, the home environments are saturated with electronic media and so we should try to understand what we're doing and what the consequences, what are the consequences. So that's really... I mean that's what I want to do is I want to understand more about early childhood media exposure on a long-term basis.

INT: That's interesting. ((laughs))

Alice: ((laughs)) It sure is.

INT: So you must be, like you pay attention to what the children watch ((0:25:34.1?)) ((laughs))

Alice: Oh absolutely. That helps me, definitely. I mean it... my, my Masters research was on picture books, but then when I had my daughter, she's three years older than my son, and she was watching a lot of Sesame Street, and I was like, you know, everyone says Sesame Street is good but what is good about it and what isn't and what do we know about it, and I did a research paper on Sesame Street so...

INT: Hmmm. That's interesting.

Alice: So... okay.

INT: This, er, ((0:26:00.7?)) Oh, I'm curious about this because you seem to have a very specific research question...

Alice: Right.

INT: ...and then the outcome of this research will be... you seem to know already.

Alice: Right, that was my purpose...

INT: Oh.

Alice: ...was to show them that, that they wouldn't have to teach me how to come up with a research question.

INT: Okay.

Alice: That I would come in, and this was, um, reinforced by my friend who helped me. She said this is really good because they want people who are smart but they also want people who don't need to be hand-held all the way through...

INT: Hmmm. Okay.

Alice: ...that have a strong focus of what they want to do, so I wanted to really stress to them right here that my research is focused, but that it also has a value to society, and so I tried to explain what, um, my outcome... my... is to explain to them why they would want me affiliated with the school and what I would bring to the school.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: So...

INT: I see. Um, could you explain a little bit more about this for me?

Alice: What's a Muppet? ((laughs))

INT: ((laughs))

Alice: A Muppet's a puppet. It's a puppet on Sesame Street and it's a...

INT: It's a...

Alice: Like Kermit the Frog.

INT: What is the program about? Sesame...

Alice: Sesame Street is a morning television show and, um, and it's like little skits with puppets.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And then there's like a 'letter of the day' and there's a 'number of the day' and there's songs and some of them are animated and some of them are live people and some of them are puppets, some of them are puppets and live people.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: So that's what it is.

INT: I see.

Alice: And so the Muppet is the, the brand name of the puppet, okay? ((laughs))

INT: ((laughs)) The name of the puppet, the brand?

Alice: The brand name. So like they're a certain style of puppet. Do you know Kermit the Frog and Miss... Big Bird?

INT: Yes, oh yes.

Alice: Those are Muppets.

INT: Okay.

Alice: Those are the Muppets.

INT: Okay. I think I saw this in Taiwan as well when I was...

Alice: Hmmm hmm.

INT: ...when I was young having those programs.

Alice: I thought so, right.

INT: Yeah. We do have...

Alice: Right.

INT: And they're a red colour... a yellow colour?

Alice: Big Bird is a big, like taller than a person...

INT: Yeah.

Alice: ...and he's bright yellow.

INT: Yes, yes.

Alice: And then Kermit the Frog is green and... yeah, okay.

INT: ((laughs))

Alice: ((laughs))

INT: Big Bird is like that.

Alice: Right.

INT: Hmmm. Yes, so what do you mean by the gender?

Alice: The gen... so in the show the Muppets are all kind of neutral...

INT: Oh.

Alice: ...you don't if they're a boy or a girl, but what you do know is that they're, they're not girls for the most part...

INT: Hmmm. Oh.

Alice: ...because the girls are defined as girls by clothing or hair barrettes...

INT: Yes, yeah.

Alice: ...and so I was looking at whether or not the identifiable gender of the Muppet has an impact on who pays attention to the show.

INT: Okay.

Alice: Do girls pay attention longer or do boys pay attention, and do they benefit. Because there's a lot of research... Sesame Street's been around for 40 years...

INT: Yeah.

Alice: ...and so there's a lot of research that shows it's be neficial but it, it doesn't really question who it's beneficial to.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: So...

INT: I see, okay, that's really interesting. ((laughs))

Alice: Okay.

INT: Then, um, could you explain more this one: "I suggest that a lack of gender..." Okay, so it's basically what you just commented on.

Alice: Right.

INT: Yeah.

Alice: And, yeah, and so I suggest... so that we, um, we can't, we refuse to analyse this because, um, we think this show is just good in general, it was a changing moment in children's television. It suddenly saw children's television as an educational tool.

INT: Okay.

Alice: And so, because it has had positive effects we just assume it's good for everybody.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And then if someone is critical of the show they... it's... do you know what cognitive dissonance is? So that it means like when we hear something that doesn't fit in to what we believe, we just reject it immediately.

INT: Okay.

Alice: So if you're a Democrat and someone tells you Sarah Palin is the best politician ever and... do you know who Sarah Palin is? She's the, she's a Republican. Do you know American politics?

INT: Yes, yes, yes.

Alice: Okay, so, so, so if you're a Democrat...

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: ...and someone tells you that George Bush is the best President ever your first response is going to be...

INT: No.

Alice: "There's no way." ((asides)) Okay, so does that make sense?

INT: Yes, yes.

Alice: Okay, okay.

INT: Yes, okay. And then, oh, I'm interested in, um, your rationale for including the research question here.

Alice: Okay, let me read it. Okay so "What early experiences shape our future behaviour and world view?" So this goes back to this statement up here, that we don't know what we're doing to our kids because nobody really studies it.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And so what we're exposed to when we're really young can change how receptive we are to pursuing an education, to reading a book, to, you know, playing sports.

INT: Yeah.

Alice: And so, um, and so I'm looking at this from a Literary perspective, a focus on Literacy and, um, I say, "I believe Literacy plays a significant role in our development because sources of Literacy are the..." So basically, um, I include as Literacy Media Literacy as well as Book Literacy and that the content in, in the media and in the books tells us something about the society we live in.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And what this information tells us helps create these frameworks, for example like all Democrats are good and all Republicans are bad, um, and that later on these are pretty fixed in our, in our belief system.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: And so that later on we choose information and we support ideas and beliefs that fit into our earliest experiences.

INT: Hmmm.

Alice: Is that enough information?

INT: Yes. Thank you!

US academic participant – Sally's interview transcript

Sally: Right.

INT: Okay, I'll put it close to you.

Sally: Okay, is that good?

INT: Yeah.

Sally: Good, good, good.

INT: So this interview is about your views on application documents in general.

Sally: Okay.

INT: And then, because I'm interested in the statement of purpose, so I will focus on that...

Sally: Okay.

INT: ...and will ask you more specific questions in terms of this document. And then in the second sections we can discuss the texts I sent you earlier.

Sally: Okay, great.

INT: Okay. So I am focusing on the doctoral...

Sally: Okay.

INT: ...doctoral...

Sally: Sure.

INT: ...admission documents. So could you briefly describe how the students' admission documents are evaluated in the admission process for me?

Sally: Okay. So within my own department?

INT: Yes.

Sally: Okay, um, well I think different people do it differently but, in terms of what I do, um, is... er, so I read the essay, and I want to make sure that they... that the student has a coherent idea of what they want to do...

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: ...that they're focused but not too narrow, um, that they, um, that their writing is good... is it recording?

INT: Yes. ((laughs))

Sally: That the writing is good, you know, I want strong writing: I want to see if they ask kind of analytical questions. I don't like anything hokey or cutesy or like quotes from Doctor Seuss or, you know, I always kind of go, "Why are you doing that?" The other thing that I don't really care for is like the kind of sucking up, you know, so, "Oh, So and So's so amazing," like when they're talking about the faculty. Like I think it's good to make connections with faculty but not overdo it. So... and I always tell students that when they ask for advice.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: The other thing is I look at the undergrad and Masters transcripts and I look to see what they did, maybe in their junior and senior year the most, um, look to see, er, what kinds of classes they did well in, which ones they might have been weaker in.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: Um, we do look at the GRE score here, although for me personally I really don't value that, and some of my colleagues don't value it at all and some of them do value it, so... but we do, because, you know, it's an Ivy League institution and we kind of have to do that. Can I take this for one second. It's just... You can sit right there, it's fine.

INT: Okay, so where are we?

Sally: Okay, so what we were... I was talking about the GRE...

INT: Process, yeah.

Sally: And, okay, so for some people the GRE is important and for others it's not. For me it's not important because I know the history of the socioeconomic and racial discrimination of the GRE and standardised tests and so I don't look at them. Now if it's really, really bad I would probably be like, "Hmmm, they better have a really, really strong GPA," so I think GPA is a much better predictor than GRE. Okay. Then the other thing I look at, especially for doctoral students, is the, um, letters of recommendation, and so I want them to all be

from scholars, I want them... I like it if, if they're from people that I respect, but sometimes I don't know them and that's okay, but they have to talk about, you know, the work ethic of the person, their ability to do research, the focus, the drive, all of those kinds of things, and also we want to have like a nice group of people so I want to know if this is a good person, you know.

INT: Okay.

Sally: So those are, those are the main things. And then, um, I mean I, I also think that the interview's incredibly important but that comes afterward, you know, you have to get through the process.

INT: Hmmm. Yeah.

Sally: So I mean we, I think we do a really good job of a holistic approach, um, to it, and I would say that the essay and the letters are probably the most important thing.

INT: Essay and...

Sally: Yeah, and the letter, yeah.

INT: ...letters.

Sally: Yeah, yeah.

INT: How about students' résumés? Do they...?

Sally: Oh, um, hmmm, I mean, if... for PhD I don't really... none of us really care that much about, um, what they, er, like have done work-wise because it doesn't really matter to us, but I would say that, um, sometimes if they've had a policy position or a research position, that might put them over the edge and... but, you know, I mean it's not bad but I would say we don't really look at that that much.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: So do international students have, have to submit their TOEFL score?

Sally: Yeah.

INT: So how about in that...?

Sally: If it's a TOEFL... if it's an international student, um, we would look... we would make sure Admissions gives us the read on the TOEFL because most of us don't know how to interpret that. And if it wasn't good enough then we wouldn't take it. I mean yeah, that would definitely matter because we want to make sure that somebody, you know, can do well in the classroom, so yeah, yeah.

INT: I see. So, in general, when you evaluate or receive the students' application documents, is there preferred orders when you evaluate them?

Sally: Is there a preferred order?

INT: Yeah, like which parts of the application will you read first? Or ((0:05:04.7?)) first.

Sally: I'd probably glance at the GPA first then I read the application. Then of course I'm going to see the GRE score and then I'll read the letters of recommendation, so in that order. And I read everybody the same order, yeah.

INT: Hmmm. Okay. So is the writing sample necessary for the...?

Sally: It's not necessary but you can turn one in if you want. And I mean I probably skim the writing sample because you get a really good idea from the essay anyway...

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: ...you know, so...

INT: Er, like what do you think the importance of statement of purpose compared with other application documents?

Sally: I think that's the most important thing, yeah, it's the most important thing because you can tell a lot... like you can tell whether or not they can write, you can tell how... whether or not they can make a good argument, um, what's important to them, their interests, you know, all of that so that's... And I really want it to be compelling and draw me in and make me want to work with them, and so... yeah. Now I will tell you that one of the things that is the best thing that you can do is to call faculty ahead of time. That makes a big difference because...

INT: Yeah.

Sally: ...it just makes a huge difference if you call and you talk to them and you get to know them, or you email them, that makes a big difference, so...

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: And I always put those... whenever I have an email exchange with someone, I have that sent to their files so other faculty can see that they did that.

INT: Okay.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: So the communication between you and...

Sally: Yeah, yeah.

INT: ...the applicants.

Sally: Yeah, always, yeah.

INT: Okay. I see. So, um, what do you think are the most elements or the qualities for potential PhD students to get accepted in this program?

Sally: Um, well, I think you have to be... you have to be a really, really excellent writer. You have to have keen analytical skills, you have to stand out and really be dynamic I think. I don't think you can be a wallflower. I think you need to be a dynamic person because... I mean our selection rate is so... we hardly select anyone, so like this year we took one PhD student, last year I think we took four. So, um, couple... we just take... even if we have the slots, if we don't find ones we want we won't take them. So you have to be... you have to be pretty tremendous in order to get in here. And I would say that, um, when you come for the interview you need to be able to relate to people, you need... like I said, dynamic. You need to ask probing questions – and probably one of the most important things is you have to have a connection with one of the faculty. You're just not going to get in unless you have a connection, meaning not like a personal connection but your work needs to connect to one of the faculty.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: So, for example, this year, one of my students, um, he is interested in doing History of Higher Education and of course that was great because I rarely get those students and he's a really strong candidate so that was great. Last year, um, one of my students was interested in doing work on ((0:07:55.9?)) colleges, so that was a pull and I really wanted her and she only applied one place; she only applied here, she didn't apply anywhere else which is just crazy but she didn't apply anywhere else, and of course I wanted her and she wanted to work with me so that works really well. Same thing with this new student. So they had contacted me ahead of time, we had had extensive discussions, and, and I went into the meeting fighting for them, I wanted them. You see what I mean?

INT: I see. Hmmm.

Sally: So... yeah.

INT: You just mentioned that you don't want like a wall... um, a flower, what... the terms?

Sally: Oh, a wallflower, oh you heard that... where are you from?

INT: Taiwan.

Sally: Taiwan, okay. So a wallflower, that's funny, that's like a colloquial... a wallflower is someone who's really shy and doesn't talk to anyway, just kind of stands in a corner.

INT: Okay.

Sally: So you would have a really hard time fitting in with the Higher Education students here because they are so ((0:08:48.9?)) like if you were like that. And, um, and also you got to speak up in class, you have to... you know, there are lots of... there are lots of different views on this though, so... and I'll just be really frank. So a lot of times I'll have, um, especially students from different Asian countries who are international students who'll be in my classes and they're very quiet. And so I will sometimes say, "Hey," you know, "I know that you might... it might be the norm for you to kind of just absorb, take notes, and be quiet, but you're in the United States now and one... if you want to stay here, one of the things you have to do is you have to kind of talk, okay?"

INT: Yeah.

Sally: And if you're bad doing that... because I know that there are cultural differences, but if you go to school in another country you have to learn those cultural...

INT: Yeah.

Sally: ...kind of norms. Just like if I went to school in England, for example, right, I know that things are a little bit different there and I'll have to learn those cultural norms. And so that, that's kind of... we look for that; we look for students who... though they don't have to have the same cultural norms but they have to be able to adapt. So that would...

INT: I see.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: So like among those application documents they've asked you to rank the importance of each one what would they be?

Sally: In order?

INT: Yeah.

Sally: Um, the statement of purpose, the letters of recommendation, the undergraduate transcripts, graduate transcripts... um, what else is there?

INT: Résumé.

Sally: Résumé. GRE, and GRE doesn't... I try not even to look at it because it just... I just don't think it's fair, you know, I don't think it's fair at all so I just don't do it. And I got a really high GRE score but I don't think it's fair so... yeah.

INT: Okay. So during the admission period would it be many applicants contacting you for some advice?

Sally: All year round, all the time.

INT: Okay.

Sally: I mean I have four emails from them right now.

INT: Wow.

Sally: Because I usually get, every day, you know, on average I get between 125 emails just work related and I would say at least three or four of them a day are people, and they, they want to work with me for a particular reason. So... now I don't know if everybody gets that but I would assume in our Higher Ed faculty that they do because we're all fairly prominent, so if you're more prominent you're going to get more people want to work with you. So not all of them can and it's terrible, right, they can't all work with you so...

INT: ((laughs))

Sally: But I usually find people who are a pretty good fit but I, I'll help anyone, but I always tell them, "You need to apply to a whole variety of programs; you can't just apply here and, you know, you need to keep your options open," so I tell them that, yeah.

INT: Hmmm. Because it's very competitive.

Sally: Yes, absolutely. So I'm ((0:11:31.2?)) I'm hungry.

INT: What is that?

Sally: Have you ever had these? Have you ever had them?

INT: Yes.

Sally: Oh, well someone gave them to me. One of my students gave them to me and so, er, I'm going to have a couple because...

INT: You're hungry.

Sally: Yeah, I'm a little bit hungry, I don't know, I wanted some gum. But anyway, so keep talking.

INT: ((laughs))

Sally: If I can get it open.

INT: Hmmm. So like I know that each faculty would need to have like... because there will be many applicants apply...

Sally: Yes.

INT: ...and then you have to like lists, like lists of students, and then, I mean if you and other faculty have different views about the...

Sally: Oh yeah, yeah.

INT: ...difference and how you, how do you make the consensus, how to achieve that, a similar list.

Sally: ((0:12:26.1?))

INT: ((laughs))

Sally: Okay. Well what we do is we go through and we eliminate the ones that we don't want first.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: Okay, so we all get a list and then... and we all read all the files.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: So we eliminate the ones that are just... like some people are just crazy.

INT: ((laughs))

Sally: I mean they just are. Have you had ((0:12:47.7?)) before.

INT: Yes. I really, really like these.

Sally: Oh good. ((laughs))

INT: ((laughs))

Sally: So, okay, we eliminate the ones we don't want and, honestly, some people, you can tell they don't know what they're doing, so you just get rid of those.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: Then we go and we try to eliminate some of the weaker candidates, just people who would have a really hard time succeeding here.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: Then we... kind of each put like our top candidates and we go round the room, we talk about them, okay. So we'll talk about the top candidates and we think about things like, um, gender and race, we think about, um, area of expertise or area of interest, who they want to work with. So when I'm looking at them I'm always thinking okay, so I need someone... we need someone for this ((0:13:38.8?)) someone for this faculty, someone for this... I try to make sure that all the faculty have someone. Not everybody's like that; some people they want a bunch of students, they want them and they don't really want to share.

INT: Oh, okay.

Sally: Okay. So they...

INT: So they want their own students.

Sally: Yeah, they might want like three students...

INT: They will not ((0:13:55.4?)) about that.

Sally: ...and they don't really care...

INT: Okay.

Sally: ...if you need your students or not, okay.

INT: Okay.

Sally: And then... but other people are more generous, so it just depends, you know.

INT: Hmmm. So is there a limited amount per faculty.

Sally: Yes, yes.

INT: Like how many students...

Sally: No, um...

INT: ...you can have.

Sally: There's a limited number per, in here, division or department?

INT: Division?

Sally: Department.

INT: Department.

Sally: Right. Yeah.

INT: Okay.

Sally: You know what that means?

INT: Like Higher Edu...?

Sally: Yeah, like each of the different area, so like program for example, yeah, there's a limited spot, I mean a limited amount. So sometimes... it's allotted by the Dean so sometimes we get five, sometimes we get four, sometimes we get three.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: So like we have one-two-three-four-five... five standing faculty members who would make those decisions and, basically, if we only got three students then the year before maybe if somebody got a student then the next year they wouldn't, see. So, you know, you just have to think about that and you have to try to be fair, you can't always think about yourself but sometimes people do, you know, I mean that just inevitably happens.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: And sometimes it's usually the same people over and over who want all the students every year.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: And they're just going to, um... and there are other people who are very generous and like, "Oh, I had students last year, don't worry about it." Um, there are also... the conversations also revolve around, um, especially like racial diversity, making sure that we have a really diverse group, um, just kind of... and area of expertise background.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: So I would say that, yeah. That's a big deal.

INT: So like, um, because you mentioned like there's some, some faculty may pay attention to the GRE score, so if like the students' GRE score will be... like didn't achieve the certain stage...

Sally: Hmmm hmm.

INT: ...would it be kind of exclude straight after...?

Sally: Well, for some faculty is very important, so ((0:16:00.2?)) faculty argue with one another. And like we have some people who are very numbers oriented and other people who are not and so they'll argue.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: And then, um, let's see, some people would be eliminated by a vote. And that's how we'll eliminate them. And some people, you know, sometimes people, just something in their essay turns off a faculty member and then they'll, "I don't want that person." So...

INT: I see. I have heard like the school, er, the school-wide like... may put...

Sally: Oh yeah, there's also the school-wide committee.

INT: ...lots of emphasis on the students' GRE score.

Sally: Here? Yeah, they do, yeah. So, okay, so the school, um, also has a committee that looks at all of our decisions when we're done, yeah. So somebody with a lower GRE score and maybe okay grades but not great grades, could get bumped and not picked...

INT: Okay.

Sally: ...by the committee.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: Now if it's... you know, there are different, um, average GREs, depending on your race or ethnicity, so, you know, for your race the GRE score's higher but for African Americans or Latinos they tend to be lower, so you'll look at the Latino average overall in the country and you'll look at the African American average overall and the white average.

INT: Okay.

Sally: And so... and we look at an Asian average as well. Now one thing I'll tell you is that if you're Asian and you have a low score I think you'd have a hard time getting in, you know, which I find somewhat problematic because if you're good everywhere else I don't think you should have a hard time. But, um... and then, as you know, no matter what you say, the expectation is that if you're Asian you're going to have high scores.

INT: ((laughs))

Sally: So...

INT: So Asian students need to have a high score, GRE score. ((laughs))

Sally: Yeah. So, um, and then, um, so they'll look at the average. So if let's say the average for African Americans overall was, I don't know, let's say 1000, we don't, you know, we'd look at that but most people who get in here have to have well over 1000. So... and they do

care about GRE scores at the Dean's level and so, you know, the average GRE scores are 1380, that's high.

INT: Yeah, because the full score is 16.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: Yeah.

Sally: So...

INT: It's a new criterion?

Sally: Well yeah, but nobody wants to admit that that's a criterion. I mean I've said in faculty meetings before, "Okay, I heard that 13... that we're all, we've got like a cut-off here." No, there's no cut-off... but there is.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: So... I mean I've said it publicly so I don't mind saying it on tape so... yeah. So that can be... that, I think like one of my colleagues and I, we're very frustrated by the use of the GRE.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: But I'm just really vocal about it. I mean I have tenure, I can basically say what I want about it, you know, so...

INT: ((laughs))

Sally: But yeah, but I don't make decisions based on that. And I've had to fight for students before who had lower GREs...

INT: Okay.

Sally: ...but they graduated and they're in our faculty, you know, I mean they're fine, they're fine.

INT: Yeah.

Sally: They did a great job, they were amazing. So... yeah. So the discussions are around... a lot of times around GRE, around area of interest, and around diversity.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: But most people in our division, we all really care about diversity, we all want that. Um, and we have a really diverse doctoral cohort but not all divisions are like that.

INT: Hmmm hmm. So, in general... I mean for a year, if there are like 50 student applicants you will review all of them?

Sally: We... yeah, so usually there might be 150.

INT: 150, okay.

Sally: And then we will review all of them. Although down in the Central Admissions office, if someone doesn't meet, um, certain qualifications, they won't even give them to us.

INT: Oh really? So it's already ((0:20:02.7?))

Sally: Yes, yeah, there's a first cut. Yeah, there's a first cut. I don't like that but there is, yeah, there's a first cut.

INT: So, the students', um, application documents sent to you have already been selected?

Sally: Yes, yeah.

INT: Okay.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: I see.

Sally: But we get to see who was cut.

INT: ((laughs)) Okay.

Sally: We get to see that. We get to see that on a spreadsheet.

INT: Hmmm hmm. Okay. So, um, I'm curious about the terms, personal statement and statement of purpose...

Sally: Okay.

INT: ...because I mean I read some academic articles and the studies on the personal statement, on these particular documents, they used the personal statement but I do notice on the *** website...

Sally: Hmmm hmm.

INT: ...it says the statement of purpose.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: Because personally I use these two terms interchangeably.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: But I do find that people have some distinction about this.

Sally: I think there probably is a distinction.

INT: So I want to hear what you...

Sally: Well I think a personal statement is more of like your life journey to where you are and where you want to go.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: A statement of purpose is why you want to get a PhD, what you bring to it and what you hope to learn.

INT: Hmmm. Hmmm.

Sally: It's a little bit different. But people, you know, they fill them out the same way, probably.

INT: Hmmm. So, as you just mentioned, you don't want the statement of purpose too personal, right?

Sally: Well, I don't mind it being personal but not hokey.

INT: Okay.

Sally: So like... Okay, so one time I read this statement of purpose and the person put a photograph in it of them walking up a staircase...

INT: ((laughs))

Sally: ...and it said, "I'm ascending a stairway of greatness," or something. I thought, oh my God, that's just crazy.

INT: ((laughs))

Sally: Or they'll put like really hokey quotes from Dr Seuss or Sesame Street or something. No, you don't do that, you're an adult, you know. But some people think, oh that's great. I don't like that.

INT: Okay, I see.

Sally: Yeah, so...

INT: So, er, when you, um, evaluate a student's statement of purpose, um, what do you expect to see, what content or what do you want to find from reading their statement of purpose?

Sally: Um, well, I want to know a little bit about their background.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: I want to know what motivates them. I kind of want to know that they're passionate about something.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: That they have like a fire in their belly, you know, like excited about it, because I sort of have that so...

INT: I can see it.

Sally: Yeah ((laughs)) I do.

INT: Yeah, very... ((0:22:25.1?))

Sally: So I like that. I like to know that... I like to know that they've thought about the field and that they at least know something about the field, um, that they have an idea in mind for what they want to do but that they're also open enough, you know.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: And I'm looking to see that they're a good writer, yeah, and then it makes sense, if there's good flow and everything, good argument, yeah.

INT: Hmmm. I see. Thank you.

Sally: Hmmm hmm.

INT: So when you evaluate the students' statements of purpose, do you follow any institutional criterion like...

Sally: No.

INT: ...like there's a bullet point that you have to make sure...

Sally: No, just feel it, yeah.

INT: Okay, so everyone did their own.

Sally: Yeah. Now some people might, when they evaluate, they might do that but I don't. But I never do that for anything, grading, nothing.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: You know, just never. I'm just not like that. I don't use like rubrics or anything like that.

INT: I see. Um, I notice there is a word limit on the statement of purpose because I found it in the *** website.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: And it says the word limit is 750.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: So I'm wondering, if the students go over that word limit, would it be an issue?

Sally: Well, if they go over a little bit nobody cares.

INT: Okay.

Sally: But if they go over a lot sometimes people will notice. I guess I don't really even look at that but... but some people will notice and they'll be like, "Well, why did they go over? Why did they give...?" That's another thing. So sometimes when they go over they've done a generic statement and, if you do a generic statement, you almost... you're almost guaranteed you won't get in.

INT: What is a...?

Sally: A generic would be that you sent the same statement to every school.

INT: Oh, okay.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: That's not good.

INT: Hmmm hmm.

Sally: Yeah. Or if you forget to switch the name of the institution in the statement, that's not good.

INT: ((laughs)) That's horrible!

Sally: I know but people do it every year.

INT: ((laughs)) Okay.

Sally: Yeah, they do it every year.

INT: So if that happens and...?

Sally: We just get rid of them, yeah. We just get rid of them 'cause...

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: I mean they didn't have enough... you know, they just... yeah, so it's just bad.

INT: Hmmm. That's interesting.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: Okay, so like in the process of evaluation, um, when you reviewed those applicants' documents...

Sally: Hmmm hmm.

INT: ...will you discuss with other staff, I mean like informal chattings with your colleagues?

Sally: Yeah. So sometimes, if I really want someone, and then I know someone else really wants someone, we'll kind of talk behind the scenes and then go in knowing that we're going to fight for those people, okay?

INT: Hmmm hmm.

Sally: Yeah, so we do that.

INT: Hmmm. So you said you want someone, is that you expect that student when he or she comes in...

Sally: To work with me.

INT: ...they can work... okay.

Sally: Yes, yeah.

INT: So it's already chose the student...

Sally: Yes, that's how you do it.

INT: Oh, okay.

Sally: Yeah, that's how we do it here.

INT: Okay.

Sally: We only pick people who we want to work with.

INT: Okay.

Sally: So like, for example, if there was someone who wanted to come here and work on, um, er, work related to adult learners, okay, we wouldn't pick them.

INT: Okay.

Sally: Because nobody does that.

INT: Hmmm hmm.

Sally: And who's going to advise them?

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: Or if someone were to come and want to work on like International Education in China, we wouldn't pick them because we don't know anything about that. You see what I mean?

INT: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sally: But if they wanted to work on International Education in Africa, I know about that so I could work with them, and I have a student like that.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: But my colleagues would probably give me some crap about it, right, because they'd be like, "Well, we don't really do International Education." I'd have to fight hard for them.

INT: Hmmm.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: I see.

Sally: Yeah.

INT: I think I've finished the questions here so...

Sally: Oh, okay, good, all right.

INT: Thank you!

Appendix 11 – Anna’s Personal Statement for her PhD application to the UK-based institution

*(Notes: The mark of ‘***’ in this text is the information protected by the researcher.)*

Anna’s Personal Statement

I cannot find any better way to start this statement than with a quotation by Socrates: ‘the only thing I know is that I know nothing’ (*εν οίδα ότι ουδέν οίδα*). His words nicely express my profound beliefs on spiritual cultivation and my desire for expanding my knowledge continuously and persistently.

During my school years, I learned that nothing is accomplished without hard work, persistence and sacrifices. Specifically, I tried very hard and achieved excellent results for my academic performance in all subjects (see Appendix 1). Besides this, I cultivated my personality and learned to be responsible and care for other beings.

After graduation, I took the highly competitive university entry exams and obtained a place in the Department of Primary School Education at the University of ***. My university education was intense and demanding but simultaneously fulfilling and stimulating (see Appendix 2 – detailed transcript of my undergraduate courses). Worth mentioning, too, is that I have chosen to do this particular degree because I love children and admire their spontaneity, sincerity and creativity. Additionally, having my mother as a model, who is also a primary school teacher, I was introduced to the magical world of education and learned about the constraints and requirements of teaching from a very young age.

During my studies at the University of *** I completed several research projects. Specifically, I conducted a quantitative investigation (questionnaire based) of the factors that influence the Greek Cypriot students’ performance in the spelling of Greek language. I also carried out a qualitative exploration as to how the memory of our occupied land is being promoted in History lesson (interviews with primary school teachers and evaluation of the history textbooks). Additionally, I performed a B.A. thesis, entitled ‘The place of children’s literature in Greek Cypriot primary education’, the aim of which was to identify (children’s) literature role and function in Greek Cypriot primary education, as informed by the aspects of the Greek Cypriot cultural and educational context. This research involved a bibliography of the traditional and contemporary theories in the field of children’s literature, an examination of the policy documents regarding literature teaching in Greek Cypriot primary schools and an ethnographic exploration of Greek Cypriot primary school teachers’ attitudes to children’s literature. This study has been presented in the conference ‘Quality in Education: Research and Teaching’ (see Appendix 3 – schedule of the conference).

Noteworthy, as part of my degree in the University of *** I had to fulfil a school practicum in my final year. Specifically, I was placed in two different classrooms in two different Greek Cypriot primary schools and I was expected to observe and teach lessons as an assistant teacher (see Appendix 4). During this period, I faced the challenges, responsibilities, complexities and possibilities arising in multilingual and multicultural classrooms with children from diverse backgrounds. However, since my core primary teacher education course did not give me the chance to acquire knowledge in linguistically diverse topics, I was unable to respond to these challenges. On the other hand, I have learned through this experience that the multilingual composition of modern societies should not be considered as a disadvantage and a weakness but as a creative and renewing source. Consequently, my brief but valuable experience has sparked my desire to become a successful primary school teacher and to be able to make a difference in the world of the

increasingly multilingual Greek Cypriot education. This is the reason why I have decided to pursue my studies in England.

Currently, I am a student at *** doing the MA in Language, Ethnicity and Education. Through the readings of the various classes I have attended so far, I have had the opportunity to enrich my knowledge with notions of bilingualism and multilingualism, theoretical understandings of how globalisation affects language use and ethnicity, and key concepts and issues in sociolinguistics as well as in second language acquisition theory and research. But most important of all, I have gained understanding on several policies, theories and practices regarding the teaching and learning of English as a second language in school settings as well as principles and practices of integrating language and content teaching. While researching on and writing the assignments that I was required to submit for the modules which I studied and also for my dissertation, I have attempted to relate my new acquired knowledge with my experiences and with the needs I will be required to address once I return back to Cyprus in order to teach. However, I strongly believe that a further exploration of the theories, principles and practices in the field of second/additional language education and especially an examination of their effectiveness within the Greek Cypriot context, would help me to develop a strong background on these theories and their practical implementations. This training is provided to me with the programme you offer, *** Research MPhil/PhD, in which I am particularly eager to enrol. My objective is to be able, by the end of this research programme, to efficiently manage all multilingual challenges that I will face as a Greek Cypriot primary school teacher. Also, one of my ambitions is to become a pioneer in Greek Cypriot primary education, as I will provide the rest of the Greek Cypriot primary school teachers with the knowledge they need to better serve their linguistically diverse students.

What is worth mentioning, too, is that, since I believe that education cannot be achieved only through books, I was involved in a number of extra activities. These activities have added colour and meaning in my life but also contributed in enriching my cultural world. Reading Greek and international literature was very beneficial as it helped me broaden my mind and look at everything from a different perspective. Participating in several conferences regarding language teaching was also extremely beneficial. Additionally, I have a great passion in music and I have passed a number of music exams. The fact that I have been attending piano lessons from the age of six, have helped me relax and gain confidence. Moreover, art is one of my favourite hobbies because it helps me to express my feelings and clear my thoughts combining it with my participation to a number of art competitions (see Appendix 5). These activities have offered me skills that primary school teachers in Greek Cypriot education need to have as they are expected to teach all the different curriculum subjects and they have also promoted my whole sided education.

Lastly, I am very looking forward to the prospect of doing a research degree at ***, a university renowned for the excellence of its teaching and the calibre of its graduates. Being able to study a research programme at your University and learn from specialised professors and leading principles in my subject area would fulfil my goals towards achieving my ideal professional study. Therefore, if you decide to accept my application it would be a great opportunity which I am prepared to take full advantage of.

Appendix 12 – A full version of the metadiscoursal resources in Anna's Personal Statement

*(The marked part (***) is the information protected by the researcher.)*

I (Self-mentions) **cannot find any better way** (Boosters and Attitude markers) to start this statement than with a quotation by **Socrates: ‘the only thing I know is that I know nothing’** (εν οίδα ότι ουδέν οίδα) (Evidentials). His words nicely express **my** (Self-mentions) profound beliefs on spiritual cultivation and **my** (Self-mentions) desire for expanding **my** (Self-mentions) knowledge continuously and persistently.

During **my** (Self-mentions) school years, **I** (Self-mentions) learned that nothing is accomplished without hard work, persistence and sacrifices. **Specifically** (Code glosses), **I** (Self-mentions) tried very hard and achieved excellent results for **my** (Self-mentions) academic performance in all subjects (see **Appendix 1**) (Endophoric markers). **Besides** (Transitions) this, **I** (Self-mentions) cultivated **my** (Self-mentions) personality and learned to be responsible and care for other beings.

After graduation, **I** (Self-mentions) took the highly competitive university entry exams and obtained a place in the Department of Primary School Education at the University of *** (this is the name of the university where the student did her undergraduate). **My** (Self-mentions) university education was intense and demanding **but** (Transitions) simultaneously fulfilling and stimulating (see **Appendix 2 – detailed transcript of my** (Self-mentions) **undergraduate courses**) (Endophoric markers). **Worth mentioning, too** (Transitions and Attitude markers), is that **I** (Self-mentions) have chosen to do this particular degree **because** (Transitions) **I** (Self-mentions) love children and admire their spontaneity, sincerity and creativity. **Additionally** (Transitions), having **my** (Self-mentions) mother as a model, who is also a primary school teacher, **I** (Self-mentions) was introduced to the magical world of education and learned about the constraints and requirements of teaching from a very young age.

During **my** (Self-mentions) studies at the University of *** (this is the name of the university where the student did her undergraduate), **I** (Self-mentions) completed several research projects. **Specifically** (Code glosses), **I** (Self-mentions) conducted a quantitative investigation (questionnaire based) of the factors that influence the Greek Cypriot students' performance in the spelling of Greek language. **I** (Self-mentions) **also** (Transitions) carried out a qualitative exploration as to how the memory of our occupied land is being promoted in History lesson (interviews with primary school teachers and evaluation of the history textbooks). **Additionally** (Transitions), **I** (Self-mentions) performed a B.A. thesis, entitled 'The place of children's literature in Greek Cypriot primary education', the aim of which was to identify (children's) literature role and function in Greek Cypriot primary education, as informed by the aspects of the Greek Cypriot cultural and educational context. This research involved a bibliography of the traditional and contemporary theories in the field of children's literature, an examination of the policy documents regarding literature teaching in Greek Cypriot primary schools and an ethnographic exploration of Greek Cypriot primary school teachers' attitudes to children's literature. This study has been presented in the conference 'Quality in Education: Research and Teaching' (see **Appendix 3 – schedule of the conference**) (Endophoric markers).

Noteworthy (Transitions and Attitude markers), as part of **my** (Self-mentions) degree in the University of *** (this is the name of the university where the student did her undergraduate) **I** (Self-mentions) had to fulfil a school practicum in **my** (Self-mentions) final year. **Specifically** (Code glosses), **I** (Self-mentions) was placed in two different classrooms in two different Greek Cypriot primary schools and I was expected to observe and teach

lessons as an assistant teacher (see **Appendix 4**) (Endophoric markers). During this period, **I** (Self-mentions) faced the challenges, responsibilities, complexities and possibilities arising in multilingual and multicultural classrooms with children from diverse backgrounds. **However** (Transitions), since **my** (Self-mentions) core primary teacher education course did not give **me** (Self-mentions) the chance to acquire knowledge in linguistically diverse topics, **I** (Self-mentions) was unable to respond to these challenges. **On the other hand** (Transitions), **I** (Self-mentions) have learned through this experience that the multilingual composition of modern societies **should not be considered** (Hedges) as a disadvantage and a weakness **but** (Transitions) as a creative and renewing source. **Consequently** (Transitions), **my** (Self-mentions) brief **but** (Transitions) valuable experience has sparked **my** (Self-mentions) desire to become a successful primary school teacher and to be able to make a difference in the world of the increasingly multilingual Greek Cypriot education. This is the reason why **I** (Self-mentions) have decided to pursue **my** (Self-mentions) studies in England.

Currently, **I** (Self-mentions) am a student at *** (the name of the school) doing the MA in Language, Ethnicity and Education. Through the readings of the various classes **I** (Self-mentions) have attended so far, **I** (Self-mentions) have had the opportunity to enrich **my** (Self-mentions) knowledge with notions of bilingualism and multilingualism, theoretical understandings of how globalisation affects language use and ethnicity, and key concepts and issues in sociolinguistics as well as in second language acquisition theory and research. **But most important of all** (Transitions, Boosters and Attitude markers), **I** (Self-mentions) have gained understanding on several policies, theories and practices regarding the teaching and learning of English as a second language in school settings as well as principles and practices of integrating language and content teaching. While researching on and writing the assignments that **I** (Self-mentions) was required to submit for the modules which **I** (Self-mentions) studied and also for **my** (Self-mentions) dissertation, **I** (Self-mentions) have attempted to relate **my** (Self-mentions) new acquired knowledge with **my** (Self-mentions) experiences and with the needs **I** (Self-mentions) will be required to address once I return back to Cyprus in order to teach. **However** (Transitions), **I** (Self-mentions) **strongly believe** (Boosters and Attitude markers) that a further exploration of the theories, principles and practices in the field of second/additional language education and especially an examination of their effectiveness within the Greek Cypriot context, **would** (Hedges) help **me** (Self-mentions) to develop a strong background on these theories and their practical implementations. This training is provided to me with the programme **you** (Engagement markers) offer, *** (the name of the programme) MPhil/PhD, in which **I** (Self-mentions) am particularly eager to enrol. **My** (Self-mentions) objective is to be able, by the end of this research programme, to efficiently manage all multilingual challenges that **I** (Self-mentions) will face as a Greek Cypriot primary school teacher. **Also** (Transitions), one of **my** (Self-mentions) ambitions is to become a pioneer in Greek Cypriot primary education, **as** (Transitions) **I** (Self-mentions) will provide the rest of the Greek Cypriot primary school teachers with the knowledge they need to better serve their linguistically diverse students.

What is worth mentioning, too (Transitions and Attitude markers), is that, **since** (Transitions) **I** (Self-mentions) **believe** (Attitude markers and Boosters) that education cannot be achieved only through books, **I** (Self-mentions) was involved in a number of extra activities. These activities have added colour and meaning in **my** (Self-mentions) life but also contributed in enriching my cultural world. Reading Greek and international literature was very beneficial **as** (Transitions) it helped **me** (Self-mentions) broaden **my** (Self-mentions) mind and look at everything from a different perspective. Participating in several conferences regarding language teaching was **also** (Transitions) extremely beneficial. **Additionally** (Transitions), **I** (Self-mentions) have a great passion in music and **I** (Self-mentions) have passed a number of music exams. **The fact that** (Transitions and Boosters) **I** (Self-mentions) have been attending piano lessons from the age of six, have helped **me**

(Self-mentions) relax and gain confidence. **Moreover** (Transitions), art is one of **my** (Self-mentions) favourite hobbies **because** (Transitions) it helps **me** (Self-mentions) to express **my** (Self-mentions) feelings and clear **my** (Self-mentions) thoughts combining it with **my** (Self-mentions) participation to a number of art competitions (**see Appendix 5**) (Endophoric markers). These activities have offered **me** (Self-mentions) skills that primary school teachers in Greek Cypriot education need to have **as** (Transitions) they are expected to teach all the different curriculum subjects and they have also promoted **my** (Self-mentions) whole sided education.

Lastly, **I** (Self-mentions) am very looking forward to the prospect of doing a research degree at *** (the name of the school where the student was applying), a university renowned for the excellence of its teaching and the calibre of its graduates. Being able to study a research programme at **your** (Engagement markers) University and learn from specialised professors and leading principles in **my** (Self-mentions) subject area **would** (Hedges) fulfil **my** (Self-mentions) goals towards achieving **my** (Self-mentions) ideal professional study. Therefore, if **you** (Engagement markers) decide to accept **my** (Self-mentions) application it **would** (Hedges) be a great opportunity which **I** (Self-mentions) am prepared to take full advantage of.

Appendix 13 – Alice’s Personal Statement for her PhD application to the US-based institution

*(The marked part (***) is the information protected by the researcher.)*

Alice’s Personal Statement

My desire to pursue an academic career in education is, in part, a response to the following quote:

Prospective longitudinal studies and intervention experiments should be undertaken...As a society we are engaged in a vast and uncontrolled experiment with our infants and toddlers, plunging them into home environments that are saturated with electronic media. We should try to understand what we are doing and what are the consequences. p. 519

(Anderson, D. R., Pempek, T. A. (2005). Television and very young children. *American behavioral scientist*, 46, 505-522.)

My goal is to take on this challenge and to expand the scholarly understanding of the effects of educational media on preschoolers and young children. The outcome of this research will be a better understanding of how literacy is a social construction and that literacy begins long before we are able to read or write. My research will also broaden the boundaries of literacy to incorporate multimedia content. Finally, I hope my research will challenge existing gender paradigms and will help to identify gaps in students’ abilities based on gender, race, culture or other significant demographics.

For the last three years I have been working on a content analysis of Muppet gender on *Sesame Street* and argue that there are inherent gender biases that are part of a deep structure in society, and the biases contribute to our children's worldview. These biases are reflected in the Muppets’ roles and in the critical research done on *Sesame Street*. I suggest that a lack of gender-based criticism may be due to cognitive dissonance: we are unable to assess this fairly because our knowledge frameworks, or schemas, do not allow us to see the bias. I presented these initial findings at a conference in 2007.

Very broadly, I wish to answer the question, “What early experiences shape our future behavior and worldview?” I believe literacy plays a significant role in our development because sources of literacy are sites of social and cultural learning, and I believe our earliest experiences shape this literacy. My Master’s research was on the communicative function of children’s picture books and looked specifically at characteristics that define award-winning books.

In addition to my Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees, I have taken a graduate class at Villanova University and sat in on one at the *** (ED590, Peter, Winter, 2009) to expand my academic resources. The natural progression is a doctoral program, which will grant me access to research facilities and experts so I can learn more about quantitative and qualitative analysis and particularly how to use a mixed methods approach. Also, continuing this research in an academic environment would help me develop research questions that would withstand rigorous scrutiny.

My background in economics and mass communication at first glance may not seem a natural fit for a candidate for a doctoral program in education yet my research goals and driving curiosity very squarely fit under the Reading, Writing and Literacy program at the (*** this is the name of the proposed department). I believe the Reading/Writing/Literacy program is the right place for my research because it allows for a broad definition of

education and examines the dynamic structures of society that contribute to “being literate.” Further, the emphasis on an interdisciplinary approach ties in well with my background and my research goals. If accepted to the program, I would approach *** and The Children’s Media Lab at the Annenberg School of Communication. I would also like to do coursework in other (*** this is the name of the proposed department) programs that would allow me to develop my quantitative and qualitative skills and increase my textbook knowledge of cognitive development.

What makes the Reading/Writing/Literacy program stand alone, though, is the focus on literacy, and particularly the broader social contexts involved in literacy, the opportunity to do mixed methods research, and the chance to study under faculty who specialize in younger children and picture books (*** this is the professor’s name), feminist pedagogy (*** this is the professor’s name), and discourse analysis (*** this is the professor’s name).

I expect to publish my research on *Sesame Street* and Muppet gender, which could challenge existing gender paradigms and encourage a reexamination of the goals of educational television. This work may give pause to our current understanding of the relationship between television content and social literacy. ***Ultimately, my goal is to elucidate the impact of media upon the learning process, upon our children’s perception of the world, and upon our understanding of what we feel children should know and experience.***

Appendix 14 – A full version of the metadiscoursal resources in Tommy’s Personal Statement

*(The marked part (***) is the information protected by the researcher.)*

Tommy’s Personal Statement

Initial motivation

Three years ago, I would proudly claim that I was a “science person”. One year ago, I might define myself as a “data person”. Nobody except my best friends would expect me to pursue my PhD in a field called educational research. However, I have always clearly known myself to be just as much an “education person”. My initial motivation in education dates back to my high school years, when I became aware of the priceless value of great teachers and a good education system. Due to the tremendous weight placed on test-taking, so easily would the students ignore the fact that being a nice person and showing love to the society is of great importance. Education plays a crucial role in helping them build their abilities to pursue a happier life and encouraging them to be confident about the unique power they have to shape their own future. My anticipation for college, where a student body purely propelled by passion for knowledge and each one moving toward their unique potential, was broken by reality. I kept asking myself these questions. Why were the students under so much pressure and so fearful of being themselves? What’s wrong with the education system?

The words from the movie “Dead Poets Society”, spoken by Dr Keating (played by Robin Williams), *“We all have a great need for acceptance. But you must trust that your beliefs are unique, your own. You need to strive for your own voice because the later you start, the less likely you will find it at all. Two roads diverged in a wood and I, I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference”*, resonated deeply within me. It is the creative tail, not the centered peak, that makes the normal distribution abnormally important. Students should serve the society, of course, and at meanwhile, they are the salt of the earth; Education system should enable them to inspire the society with their diversity, not let them be assimilated.

Undergraduate and graduate studies in Statistics

CR Rao said, “In the ultimate analysis, all the knowledge is history; In the sense of abstraction, all the science is mathematics; On the basis of rationality, all the judgment is statistics.” Attracted by the applied power of statistics to sort out random variation from the signal in the data, I chose statistics as my major in my junior year in the School of Mathematics at *** University. In my graduate study in the University of ***, I further pursued my interest in statistics, got a full score for nearly every course and did well in most projects. In parallel, I began to know how to think as a future statistician. Statistics is much more than R-squares and p-values. There’s perfect inner logic in statistics. People need to go back to the original ideas of statistics to render analyses meaningful. The symphony of data will certainly be overwhelmed by the noise if people listen for the underlying melody.

Research Experiences in Education

My first educational research, “The causes and impact of isolated life on college students”, was a project in the course “The thinking of sociology of education”. I learned much through designing surveys, conducting interviews, leading group discussions and making the final presentation. Moreover, I came up with suggestions to students in the study, which encouraged them to face real life problems bravely. It was a valuable experience for me

since it made me realize that educational research, no matter its scale, may have an impact on the real world by making a difference in students' lives.

At University of ***, I attended the research colloquium in the school of education the past spring. Professors from different universities were invited to give lectures each week, which gave me helpful insights in multiple areas of educational research. I also volunteered in Professor ***'s group on a project in examining the effects of standard based courses and traditional courses. We applied analysis of covariance to the data and fit growth curve with hierarchical structure. This experience taught me that quantitative researches in education do focus on the full development of a student and do care about the disadvantage groups. It plays an important role on policies and educational reforms.

My future plan

As a science person, I have a solid basis to study more advanced theories; as a data person, I have the applied abilities to do quantitative researches; as an education person, I have the passion to learn and involve in this field. I believe, with the sincere appreciation of education and a unique understanding of applied quantitative methods, I can do meaningful research in education and make my own contribution to the program.

I spoke with Dr. *** and Dr. *** during my campus visit. Their passion in Education and quantitative methods impressed me. I believe the *** program is a perfect fit for me. For my future study, I will focus on learning advanced tools of statistics well. At the same time I am eager to take a variety of education courses. Not only will they provide me with necessary background knowledge, but I expect them to also inspire me for my future research. My research interests are the effect of teacher's character, teaching method and students' motivation on students' achievement, educational reform, comparative studies, as well as evaluation and methodologies. After finishing my Ph.D., I plan to go back to *** (this applicant's hometown) and hope to contribute to the educational research there. Ultimately I hope my work will solve the problems mentioned in the first paragraph and make students' lives better.

A fortune teller I have saved and often reflect on reads, "*Keep true to the dreams of your youth*". I am a marathon runner and my dream was to one day qualify for the Boston Marathon. I made it last month and will be standing at the start line of the best marathon in the world next April. The running experience has taught me that "*The will to win means nothing without the will to prepare.*" Last month I visited the St. Andrews School in Delaware, the main place the movie "Dead Poets Society" was shot, and last week I saw Robin Williams' star in "Hollywood's Walk of Fame. Now it is the time to fulfill my dream of being an educational researcher. I hope I can start my dream here, in the *** program in *** (the name of the university).